

Minneapolis Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Clara Barton Open School

**4237 Colfax Avenue South
Minneapolis
Minnesota
55409**

Principal: Steven R. DeLapp

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Clara Barton Open is an elementary/middle school with 752 students from kindergarten through grade 8. The school population comprises 20 percent African-American, 4 percent Hispanic, 67 percent White, 1 percent American Indian and 8 percent American-Asian students. The student body includes 11 percent English Language Learners and 7 percent special education students. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007 - 2008 was 97 percent, which is above the district average of 88 percent. Twenty two percent of students are eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

The school is organized into multi-graded classes that are taught by the same teacher for two years.

Clara Barton is a magnet school with a specific 'open school' philosophy of education. This philosophy promotes students as active partners in their learning. Consequently collaboration is high and the development of social skills is very strong. Both are central to students' life in school, and faculty value student academic choice and hands-on-learning, tailor activities to individual needs and expose students to an interdisciplinary curriculum incorporating the arts, sciences and humanities.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The school provides students with a nurturing, stimulating and safe environment in which to grow and thrive academically, socially, emotionally and personally. Students love their school, behavior is exemplary and they find their work interesting, varied and mostly challenging.
- All students make good progress in a wide range of subjects, topics and activities with year-on-year MCA scores significantly above the district averages, and above state scores for nearly all students.
- The school improvement plans identify clear goals that are relevant and measurable. The goals are known to the staff and drive the professional development and actions that are effective in raising students' academic, personal and social development.
- There is a strong emphasis on students' learning and growing personally, socially, emotionally and academically because there is an agreed and shared educational philosophy, supported by teachers who are enthusiastic, committed, and imaginative in their teaching.
- Teaching is effective, differentiated and successfully promotes students' learning through strong levels of collaboration, accountable talk, developing their critical thinking skills and their active use and transferability of knowledge.
- The curriculum is broad, balanced and includes a wide range of extra-curricular activities to support student academic, social and cultural development. All staff have high expectations and are successful and effective in creating opportunities for students to show initiative and take responsibility.
- The principal has a clear vision for the school and works tirelessly to ensure that the climate is right for continuous improvement to occur along the lines of the philosophy of an 'open' magnet school.
- Parents are well informed about the personal, social, emotional and academic achievements and progress of their children at school. There are many events arranged which ensure that parents have opportunities to witness and discuss their child's achievements and progress.

Areas for Improvement:

- Review the way that teachers currently record achievements to give the principal concise assessment data about the achievement levels of students in all subjects, which can then better inform teaching and improve the learning of different groups of students.
- Use classroom observations to provide a focus on specific key elements of teaching as a way of providing information about the effectiveness of learning. This should include ways to gather information on whether the highest achievers are being sufficiently challenged.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

Clara Barton Open School provides students with a rich liberal learning experience in which they thrive and grow strongly in their academic achievements and their personal and social skills. Students are exposed to a wide range of learning experiences which, from the time they enter the school, nurtures and fosters collaboration, encourages them to use initiative and take responsibility and develops very positive attitudes towards learning. Students' confidence, self-esteem, assertiveness and general thirst for knowledge expand as they grow older. All teachers totally subscribe to the open school philosophy and as such there is complete consistency in the way in which the core policies of the school are applied. Consequently the ways in which staff and students converse is similar throughout the school and relationships everywhere are extremely positive. Students are polite and courteous. They talk easily about their work and life generally in school, a place that without exception they love and enjoy attending. Hence attendance, at 97 percent, is high.

Achievement levels in 2008 in both reading and math were uniformly well above district levels and in grades 6 through 8, above state levels. Scores are similar to recent previous years and show solid progress in academic achievement with students building on the foundations set in earlier years. The school made its adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets for a significant majority of students. However, there are some subgroups for which AYP was not met.

The basic subject curriculum follows the recommended state standards. All teachers, however, interpret and teach within the framework and philosophy of an open school. Teachers have established warm, inviting classrooms where students work at small tables, on the floor and at single work stations. Therefore there are plenty of opportunities for students to work collaboratively and independently. Students use a wide range of resources including classroom computers to enliven learning. Some activities require hallway working, revealing a hive of positive thinking and co-operation resulting in a strong buzz for learning throughout the school. Teachers' expectations for students in terms of academic achievement and personal and social development are very high. Most students find their work challenging and in very many instances very interesting. From the time students join the school, teachers create a climate in which students are building skills and developing habits of learning that will stay with them well beyond their school day. Teachers expect students to extend their thinking beyond the notion of a 'right answer', because teachers are promoting the development of critical thinking, analysis and the application of skills to many situations.

The principal has a clear vision for the school, shared and practiced by all staff. All individuals in the school 'buy' into the open program and therefore student mobility is low and staffing is stable. Teachers use a variety of effective ways to secure an understanding of students' achievements. However, an insufficient amount of student performance data is shared with the principal who, in turn, rarely uses such information for any specific purposes. The school is very welcoming and 'drips' with student work revealing a very wide range of activities and clear progression in academic work. There is often a focus on literacy and there are many displays of students' writing such as prose, poetry, and vocabulary development. For example, in relation to the word 'sneaky', a student wrote: "she licked the letters off a candy heart because it said "Romeo" and that was the only one left for the person she didn't really like."

Parents are very strong advocates for the school and are frequent participants in school developments as well as events to show them their child's and other students' work. The school enriches students' lives through many trips and exposure to a wide variety of events.

Domain 1: Student Achievement and Progress

The students' achievement and progress fully meets expectations.

The school's overall 2008 results in reading and in math were well above those of the district. In line with the way in which the school develops the whole child, students' academic performance improves the older they get. Consequently by the time they leave school, reading and math scores are well above those of the state. The school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets in both subjects for a significant majority of its students. There are however, a few subgroups that year on year are not making AYP. They include the African American subgroup and those who are English language learners. As many of these students are also eligible for free or reduced price lunch, students identified as economically disadvantaged did not meet AYP either.

The pattern of results over recent years has been similar, indicating a continuing picture of a stable well-established school program that fosters the education and growth of students' learning through the nurturing of their personal, social and emotional development. Reading scores are stronger than those of math. The pattern of results show a grade by grade building of achievement so that by the time students leave school their achievements are very high in both reading and math, as well as in other subjects, including their personal and social development. Students are exposed to a broad approach to learning and develop skills that support learning in all subjects. They maintain a portfolio of work from all subjects from kindergarten to grade 8 that reveals the breadth and quality of subject work in math, writing, social studies, art and science. Students understand rubrics showing achievement levels for subjects in addition to math and reading. At the start of each school year they are part of a process between them, their parents and teachers in setting learning goals for the year. These are reviewed at interim points during the year, although there are inconsistencies in the use of smaller next step goals to help students reach the larger goals they set for themselves. The school works very effectively in building a wide repertoire of skills for students to feel confident about their learning, especially thinking and tackling issues creatively.

The school works to an action plan with some of the goals clearly measurable. All goals relate directly to their philosophy of education and the growth of the school in the interests of the students. All staff know and understand their part in the school's development. Not all goals are, however, measurable or evaluated against success criteria. Teachers nevertheless know their students' achievements extremely well and tailor work to endeavor to ensure success on all aspects of their experience at school.

Domain 2: Quality of Learning, Teaching and Assessment

The quality of learning, teaching and assessment exceeds expectations.

Teaching is consistently good throughout the school. Teachers plan their work on the basis of the wide range of student needs and carefully tailor their programs to address them. Students are always clear about their tasks and how they are designed to improve their understanding in various areas of skill development and knowledge. The students are fully engaged and motivated by their work and throughout the school show mature levels of cooperation. From the earliest age children work and grow in a nurturing atmosphere that successfully promotes trust, respect and high levels of productive collaboration. Consequently, students work easily in pairs and groups and know their class routines, which everywhere encourage students to support each other. Work is centered on the needs of each student, even though they may be engaged in the same activity. Their tasks promote good levels of analysis, critical thinking and accountable talk. Students learn to enjoy learning. Classrooms are stimulating and provide several different spaces and small areas to support students' preferred ways of working.

At the beginning of each school year, students along with their parents, meet teachers to discuss student goals for the year. Students frequently take the lead in such discussions while goals are established. These are formally revisited on two other occasions during the year. Some teachers help students break

down these goals into more manageable units and provide small, step by step ways of achieving them. Students know their goals and the purpose of having such goals. Teachers in the main hold a vast amount of assessment information for their students' academic and personal achievements. The school is very successful at integrating the many themes that make for an effective learner. Consequently they develop a respect for others in the school which ensures for a strong climate for learning. Students learn to integrate and apply a wide range of knowledge and skills to aid understanding to new scenarios. This is done with ease and students are efficient and adept at transferring skills. Teachers use plenty of modeling strategies to ensure that students know and understand how to successfully embark upon their work.

Students are responsive to their environment. They trust and respect their teachers. They have excellent attitudes towards learning and know how to assess their own learning. Teachers provide much feedback upon which students act to improve whatever task or challenge they are working on. They use their initiative and understand all basic class routines which exist to support the learning process. The highest achieving students, however, are not always sufficiently challenged. Nearly all students know how well they are doing and most are clear about what needs to be done to improve on their achievements. It is particularly in grades 7 and 8 that students understand their performance through the use of marking grades. There is some consternation, especially with parents, about the sharpness of the move from an environment of few grades and levels to one based on graded assessments. Some parents feel that this major change unsettles their children.

Domain 3: Curriculum

The quality of the curriculum exceeds expectations.

The curriculum has a strong focus on literacy and numeracy. However, there is extensive information about other subjects such as science, social studies, music, physical and health education and art. In nearly all of these cases, time is allocated in blocks to allow students the opportunity to devote a period of more concentrated time on their work. The curriculum covers state requirements and extends into realms of investigation beyond these. All groups of students are in multi-grade classes across two grades and have the same teacher over two years. As a result, teachers have planned and prepared a program of work that is sequenced and matched accurately to students' needs. The subsequently planned inter-disciplinary work dovetails and complements single subject academics and skills development.

The curriculum is highly relevant and successfully begins from the premise that students' will learn most effectively if the academic work is underpinned by a very strong personal, social, moral, cultural and emotional curriculum. The outcome is a broad and culturally sensitive curriculum that is enriched by many after school and evening activities that involve students and parents. For example, activities such as student author evenings, where parents are invited to classrooms to hear students talk about and read extracts from their own compositions. Student inventors' fairs are arranged and students visit museums, theater and music events as well as outdoor camps and other physical activities.

Students thoroughly enjoy the work they do. Their curriculum experience is not just what they learn, but how they learn as well. Activities provide challenging work that motivates them and meets the needs of nearly all students for most of the time. Teachers employ a wide range of techniques but students themselves suggest ways of accomplishing specific tasks as this is all part of the collaborative nature of learning. Special education students and English language learners have special programs designed to meet their needs through a wide range of carefully matched resources and smaller classes. Interventions sometimes mean that they are pulled out of classes for more intensive and effective support.

Teachers have very high expectations, not only of student academic work, but their behavior, relationships and attitudes to work. The process by which students reach their academic goals is as important as the academic goal in itself. Homework and extended day activities are an integral part of school life. They are about students enjoying their learning and engaging in new and varied activities.

Homework is viewed differently by many parents, but the program is accepted, matched well to and complements students' school-based learning.

Domain 4: Leadership, Management and the Use of Data

The quality of the leadership, management and use of data fully meets expectations.

The principal has a clear and distinctive vision for the way in which the school works and develops. The whole culture of the school is based on collaboration. The whole work ethic of staff and students is based on continuous improvement. Consequently staff and parents have opportunities to discuss the qualities of Barton as an open school as well as share ideas in its development. Generally, parents are passionate about open education and while recognizing that it works for their family, it is not necessarily the program of choice for all families. There are well established procedures within the school. The work habits and the way in which teachers plan and teach their lessons conform to an agreed and accepted approach to open education. There is a shared view of education and staff work effectively and collaboratively to achieve the school's mission.

Classrooms and hallways provide spaces in which learning is successful. They are heavy with students work, sometimes work in progress and also, in the wider hallways, two and three-dimensional models of students' work from a variety of subjects. Displays are not always neat, but reveal a wide variety of work and techniques used to complete the work. From many displays the multi-directional thought processes of the students are evident. Although classrooms are the main spaces in which students learn, teachers use the hallways, the media center and auditorium to support different groupings and learning activities. Differentiated teaching methods ensure that at any one time there will be students working independently, sometimes with a computer, or in pairs or small groups.

Teachers assess and closely monitor the work of students. They collect, assess and use students' work to show students and their parents rates of progress. Extracts of such work are placed in a portfolio over the duration of their time at school as a record of overall progress and achievement. The principal is aware of the statistical data on reading and math, but does not use it to any significant effect. Although he is aware of the quality of work done throughout the school, the principal has no specific grade or subgroup related data upon which decisions for school improvement are made. However, he has recently embarked on a systematic program for monitoring classroom teaching that provides immediate and effective feedback to teachers. All professional development activities are very well planned. They are also related directly to teachers' personal professional development goals as well as the goals outlined in the action plan for school improvement. The main measurable goals in the school improvement plan, reflecting improvements in reading and math, are not monitored in a traditional way. However, frequent whole school and subgroup specialist team meetings provide forums for teacher discussions about students' achievements and subsequent needs, together with satisfactory commentary about whether the core action plan goals are being covered. While the school does not set sharp measurable goals it does have single, relevant and time related goals.

Domain 5: School Culture

The quality of the school's culture exceeds expectations.

Behavior and attitudes to learning are exemplary throughout the school. From the earliest age, teachers work with students to show them that they must be active partners in their own learning. Teachers instill a sense of pride and love for learning through the use of a wide range of hands-on and direct learning experiences. Relationships grow positively and naturally. Students find the classroom routines easy to follow because they are about informed choice as much as direction by the teacher. Students learn quickly to become independent learners. However, at the same time they learn quickly to co-operate and know that the routines include opportunities to ask other students for help should they wish to. Students

frequently and easily work in pairs and small teams. Relationships between students and with their teachers are excellent. There are no cliques, equality of opportunity is the norm and students grow in confidence and assertiveness and all are respected for who they are. The curriculum and the way in which the school and its students work helps to ensure that there is cultural respect and understanding of the values and beliefs of different cultures.

All students know how to behave, respond, give of their best, share with peers and develop high levels of personal maturity. Procedures and policies are applied consistently throughout the school and students respond in a consistent way. School staff are well known to parents. Communication between staff and parents is strong. The school has built strong positive and effective relationships with parents so that their involvement in school spans policy development and help in classrooms to community and fund raising social activities. Students know they are expected to give of their best. They also know that when in difficulty of any kind, they have people they can and do turn to. Relationships across the board are based on dignity, respect and care for one another. Consequently, students' personal, social and emotional development is a top priority.

Students have several opportunities to take responsibility and show initiative, not least in their everyday class work, but also opportunities through the active school council. The latter mirrors basic democratic processes and has made a difference to the lives of students. For example, the raising of awareness to the importance of 'green' issues, with recycling bins at strategic points around the school; and for younger children, they are partnered with grade 7 and 8 students as buddies who help in variety of constructive ways including listening to reading. Attendance is high and punctuality good. Students love their school and do not like to be absent.

Domain 6: Links with Parents and the Local Community

The quality of the school's links with parents and the local community fully meets expectations.

Communication with parents is very good. They receive almost weekly, informative newsletters from the school about events for parents and students' activities, for example, whether the basketball team was runner-up or about a forthcoming drama production. Parents also have many opportunities to join their children in events that celebrate their work. Parents also have many opportunities to serve on different school committees to discuss and oversee aspects of school development, whether budgetary matters or improvement issues. They are very active in the social and fund raising aspects of school life, as well as having many parents volunteering their time to help in school during the day.

Communication is frequent. It is principally via means such as telephone and email, although the school has an incomplete record of those parents who can access information electronically and no regular system for formally gathering the views of parents. There are useful goal setting meetings and other frequent opportunities for parents to discuss and review their child's achievements and progress with teachers. Parents recognize that their children experience a wide range of learning styles, that work is carefully matched to needs and that students are challenged. They feel that the arts are well integrated into the curriculum. Some, however, feel that the transition from classes where work is largely ungraded to grades 7 and 8 where knowledge of assessment scores is important is too great a leap. Regular workshops are held to engage parents in the developments of the school. Parents are also welcome, and take up opportunities, to show prospective parents around the school. The principal is very well known to parents. Data is not displayed in school because this is, and parents understand that it is contrary to the open school philosophy. The school is very active in ensuring that parents are part of school development. There are many events for parents and especially for parents and their children together. These activities draw on and reflect the cultural diversity of the school. The school has useful links with a wide range of agencies within the community. These partnerships support the school and enhance students' academic and personal development.