

NOVEMBER 2012 QUALITATIVE SITE REVIEW

WEDJ received performance input in a variety of ways. After our first few months of establishing a renewed culture, we welcomed feedback on areas for improvement from the members of the DC Charter Board's Qualitative Site Review (QSR) team. The review team was made up of one PCSB employee and consultants contracted to use a common rubric template to classify observations in terms of four quality classifications: Limited, Satisfactory, Proficient and Exemplary. The review consisted of one-day of observations followed by a ½ day unscheduled site visit. A team member was also to attend a WEDJ Board of Trustees Meeting and a PTA Meeting.

It took over a month to compile the review. We were content that the QSR report acknowledged some of our strengths and some areas for improvement. Initially, I was eager to gain some insight from outside the walls of our schools, to not only validate our ambitious efforts, but also to clarify specific directions and targets for improvement. While the DC Charter Board was aware that the school was operating under 'turn-around' conditions, the site review was conducted without consideration of the significant changes in leadership, shift in families (43% new students), as well as a majority of new staff. The QSR Report paid particular attention to how well the school aligned with the goals in its charter. Realizing that the goals of the charter, written in 2004, would not suffice in 2012, we had been working to revise the charter to fit the needs of our current students. While a new direction for the charter was shared with Mr. Goldman, the WEDJ Board did not move to request a modification to the charter, so the QSR report measured our success against outdated norms. Nevertheless, we paid serious attention to this first report issued on November 29, 2012.

I agreed with many findings in this first report. The feedback about the lack of student feedback (daily classroom assessment) and teachers' limited questioning techniques had also been revealed during the first set of internal performance reviews that began in October. We began introducing more research-based teaching methods, but these were challenging at first, not only for the new teachers, but also for teachers who were dependent on using textbooks. To change this culture, we needed time, and more classroom assessment resources. When the QSR team came in October to conduct their visits, we were beginning to implement many of these new approaches, first with our teacher-leaders, who later modeled them, using a team teaching strategy in their mentee's classrooms.

There were also some comments about bullying on the QSR report and we took these concerns seriously. The development of the PALS (Promoting Arts and

Leadership) course that integrated anti-bullying behavior, was not only scheduled daily for all students, it was also the first set of grades listed on the new WEDJ report card.

The QSR team representative did not attend a Board meeting, but they mentioned in their report that a quorum had not been met at our first meeting. They also indicated that a partnership with Charter Board Partners to find more Board members, would help us gain stability.

I was pleased to see that the QSR team recognized some strengths of the school. While we inherited poor re-enrollment, resulting in a 'limited' rating in this area, the review team did take notice that the number of students present in their seats was impressive. The reviewers also had good things to share with respect to school climate and culture:

- Warmth of classroom interactions between students
- Student respect for cultural and developmental differences
- Good classroom control with clearly defined standards of behavior
- New teachers appreciated the help from designated 'mentors'
- Extensive investment in professional development
- Positive school climate influenced by new PALS program

There were several comments, however, about classroom management and engagement that indicated that some classrooms were not as strong as others. While only a few students were questioned, they indicated that they felt the school was safer. The report also mentioned that the staff appreciated the support from the new leadership and the new program directions, and that they had noticed an improvement in school climate.

I disagreed with the statement in the report that referred to a lack of support for students with special needs. Our Special Education Coordinator, Stevonna Miles, was highly regarded as a conscientious and caring expert in the field. Mr. Evan Murray, Program Manager from the DCPS Special Education Department office, was a solid supporter of her work. Her team managed caseloads by adhering precisely to legal time supports individually, in small groups and through inclusion team teaching with teachers. With less than a 5% Spanish-speaking population, we did not have students who qualified for 1:1 ELL support, yet the report indicates that we had fallen short in meeting these student needs. The ELL teacher was aware that our Spanish-speaking students were more than adept at speaking English, and having someone on staff full time, who also provided additional support for identified special needs students, was much more ELL support than what was required by local policy.

There was also one new member of the special education team of six who shared some misinformation about the lack of small class teaching options for students with special needs. Ms. Miles was away the day when the QSR team reviewed special education, and when she returned the next day, and made time to meet with the representatives, they did not speak with her. I believe the 'limited' rating for special education programming was not justified. The small class sizes and common

mentor teaching practices may not have been observed, but they were happening and teachers were eager to have the support of the special education team in their rooms on a regular basis. As part of their caseloads, several special education teachers worked with grades 6, 7, and 8 students in small group supervisory roles, adding in direct teaching of research and technology skills as part of their proactive approach to supporting students with special needs. This course, which was not observed, also provided all students with additional supports in English Language Arts and data management in mathematics. Having a chance to do project-based learning in small groups was an additional plan to deliberately support student learning. This innovative course was collaboratively taught by the history, science, special education, ELL and library teachers. Students were highly engaged in this course.

Overall, the quality of the site review was well balanced, providing examples of what we were doing well, at the same time listing opportunities for improvement. We did not spend much time addressing this QSR report at the WEDJ Board of Trustees meetings. In hindsight, such discussions might have enabled the WEDJ Board members to learn much more about the school, its culture and our plans on the ground for school improvement.