

Minneapolis Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Center School

**2421 Bloomington Ave S
Minneapolis
Minnesota
55404**

Executive Director: Joe Rice

Lead Teacher: Mary Cullen

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Reviewer: Clive Parsons

Cambridge Education (LLC)



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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

The Center is a contract alternative school, open to students aged 12 to 21 years old, enrolled in grades 7 through 12 who have experienced problems within the regular school system. The school has been educating Native American youth for 30 years and was a founding member of the Minneapolis Foundation of Alternative schools. It is located in the heart of the Native American Community and the majority of the school's Board of Directors are American Indian parents and professionals from the community.

Primarily, students are American Indian and are considered at risk under Minnesota statute. The school has a full role of 60 students, of whom approximately 85 percent are American Indian. Approximately eight percent of students are Black, six percent are Hispanic and two percent are White. There are no English language learners enrolled at the school. Approximately 23 percent are special education students. Over 80 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, a much higher figure than for the district or the state. Overall attendance at the school is just over 70 percent.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The school has been successful in communicating its mission and vision to the local community and has earned the trust of families in return. As a result, there is a good sense of common purpose and the school roll is full.
- Positive relationships are evident throughout the school, and are built upon care, respect and dignity. Consequently, the school climate supports learning and students behave well and work cooperatively.
- There is a good understanding of students' academic and social needs, collectively and as individuals, so that students feel valued. This is helping to build confidence and strengthen self-esteem, especially when linked to success.
- Effective partnerships with a range of external organizations are used to extend students' academic and cultural experiences, as well as to broaden the range of services and support to which students have access. This includes additional adults volunteering in the building.
- The focus on experiential learning provides students with many 'hands-on' opportunities, as well as engagement in larger, longer-term projects such as the garden and mural. These add to the school's identity and feeling of well-being.

Areas for Improvement:

- Clearly define the characteristics, skills and understandings of a successful student and subsequently how that success will be measured and captured. Work, with the district and other partners, to recognize, publicize and communicate success.
- Plan the courses offered in terms of student outcomes, the skills and understanding to be developed, as well as the knowledge base required to underpin them. Design courses for holistic, experiential learning, indicating how student interests will be identified and pursued, while ensuring that all knowledge and understanding gained by individuals is shared with all students.
- Collectively identify what constitutes high quality learning for students. Support teachers more extensively in building the necessary pedagogy through focused classroom observations and feedback by peers, as well as the administration.
- Encourage students to take greater responsibility for the quality of their own learning by engaging them more extensively in recognizing, measuring and celebrating their own progress and achievement.
- Develop strategies that, while not condoning poor attendance patterns, enable students to more quickly catch up work missed and the ideas underpinning the current class. Establish a concept of 'assignment while on location' to strengthen connection with the school while students are away.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

The mission of the school is to use Native culture as its focus, where respect of community and individuals is highly valued, to develop positive relationships in an effort to re-engage students who are at risk. The school has been successful in this for many students. When they arrive, students often have chronic prior patterns of poor attendance and low achievement. Most students have experienced court appearances and many exhibit a strong sense of failure. Overall attendance remains low and the school did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2007-08 because of this. However, the school can demonstrate improving attendance levels for individual students and for the school as a whole. The core group of students who attend regularly is growing, although many students remain transient, and come and go as family pressures encourage and require them to travel for a wide variety of reasons. Many students would benefit from the development of strategies that enable them to quickly catch up on work missed so that they can engage with the ideas underpinning their current class. The school did make AYP in reading and mathematics in 2007-08, although students perform below state standards in both of these areas. The small size and close sense of community ensures that staff have a good understanding of students' academic and social needs. Students feel valued as a result, and this is helping to build confidence and strengthen their self-esteem. The school now needs to clearly define the characteristics, skills and understanding of a successful student and to work, with the district and other partners, on ways to recognize, publicize and communicate its achievements.

The school has been successful in communicating its mission and vision to the local community which has earned the trust of families in return. Most families now choose the school without being referred and the school roll is full as a result. Positive relationships, built upon the care, respect and dignity which lie at the heart of the school's vision, are evident throughout. The school climate supports learning and students behave well and work cooperatively. The focus on experiential learning and involvement in longer-term projects add to the school's identity and feeling of well-being among the students. All courses should now be planned in terms of student outcomes and the skills and understanding to be developed through them. Plans should also indicate how students' interests will be pursued and how all learning gained through holistic, experiential learning will be shared throughout the class. There is some very effective teaching which is enabling students to make good progress. Collectively, the staff should identify what constitutes high quality learning and work to achieve this consistently in every classroom. Focused classroom observations and feedback by peers, as well as the administration, will be central to developing the required pedagogy. Given the positive engagement of students, they could be encouraged to take greater responsibility for the quality of their own learning. Effective partnerships with a range of external organizations extend students' academic and cultural experiences. They also broaden the range of services and support to which students have access, including additional adults volunteering in the building. There is a sense of the school moving forward, developing and improving. In part, this is the result of recent stability within the staff. It is also attributable to the effective teamwork of the executive director and lead teacher. Growing rigor and increasing expectations are evident so that while relationships and community are important, so too is academic achievement. There is a strong sense of common purpose and the school has good capacity to continue its improvement.

Domain 1: Student Achievement and Progress

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

The small number and previous experience of students means that trends and patterns have more to do with the performance and progress of individual students than statistical significance. The school made

AYP in both math and reading in 2007-08, but this was as a result of the very small number of students rather than their performance. The school has introduced a computerized adaptive test, the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), taken in the fall and the spring. The scores for fall 2008 indicated that most students were performing below state standards in both reading and mathematics. Data is not yet available from the spring 2009 tests. The school's analysis indicates that in math, students tend to be stronger in discrete mathematics and weaker in algebraic patterns. Trends are less evident in reading and again more dependent on the strengths and needs of individual students. For example, in grade 8 reading vocabulary expansion and literature need further intervention, with comprehension the strongest area, although it is still low. In grade 11, reading comprehension needs further intervention, and vocabulary expansion is strong.

The school finds it difficult to keep track of the academic progress that some students make because of their attendance patterns. However, the school can identify progress in school based assessments, as well as in broader indicators such as confidence, attitude and attendance. The school has recognized that students tend to do best in the things that they find most relevant and where they have more confidence. They also do well in experiential, real life situations and arts based activities. Students achieve better in language arts than in mathematics. They learn best through hands on experiences and do well at inquisitive, natural science activities. Students are seen to be most successful in culturally relevant activities that relate specifically to who they are and/or that are connected to the land. Students are often weak in the language of science and mathematics, which does not support high performance on standardized tests. It is evident from classrooms that students often have some difficulty in communicating what they do know. To strengthen the use and understanding of the language frequently used in testing, the school is working on implementing school-wide knowledge based instruction and building academic vocabulary in all areas. The school is also working to make reading more relevant to students by making the reading material culturally relevant and by teaching reading using indigenous strategies.

Special education students score significantly lower than other students. The data also shows that Hispanic students perform lower than American Indian and Black students, although there are too few students for this data to be significant. Many students arrive with large numbers of credits, but these are not sufficiently balanced to enable rapid graduation. While students do graduate, numbers are too small for AYP calculations.

Domain 2: Quality of Learning, Teaching and Assessment

The quality of learning, teaching and assessment meets expectations in most key areas but requires continued monitoring and support.

Classroom relationships are positive and demonstrate the commitment to the school's high expectations for respect and the belief that all students can learn and make progress. Learning intentions are clear so that students understand what they are doing and why. There is some very effective teaching which is enabling students to make good progress. In these classes, the teacher rigorously engages the students and challenges them at a good level, while providing contexts and connections that scaffold learning and support students effectively. The uncompromising determination to ensure that students understand and make progress results in clear success and improvement, which builds their confidence and self esteem. Teachers consciously attempt to use a variety of instructional strategies in achieving the goal of delivering holistic experiential learning, while enabling student choice. There is a good understanding of collective academic and social needs. The focus on experiential learning provides students with many 'hands-on' opportunities, which they appreciate and enjoy. Engagement in larger, longer-term projects, such as the garden and mural, also add to the school's identity and students' feeling of connection and well-being. While this approach is often effective, the element of choice can sometimes lead to a lack of rigor or focus on specific outcomes so that learning becomes undirected. Collectively, staff should now identify what constitutes high quality learning for students within the

school's mission and vision, based upon what is shown to be most effective in practice, and strive to achieve it consistently in every classroom.

Students generally find instruction engaging and they cooperate with each other and the adults present. Lessons provide satisfactory opportunities for students to solve problems and to develop their research and analysis skills. Students are taught how to use dictionaries, thesauruses and other references, including electronic sources. They are then encouraged to use these to support content and skill development. The instructional team plans together before each quarter to create a coherent curriculum and to share ideas, and then meets to discuss how implementation is going. Teaching through a whole school theme encourages connections to be made throughout the day and enables greater scaffolding in order to meet students' needs. The small setting enables teachers to identify individual learning needs and work to address them successfully. Some class periods each day are team taught, so that students, including special education students, receive even more individualized support. Teachers use student test results when available, as well as classroom assessments and teacher observation to chart achievement and progress. The school is also in the process of developing a system for using and tracking curriculum based measurements in mathematics and reading. Each student is assigned an advisor with whom they meet regularly. Advisors help students sign-up for their classes using their transcripts and individual credit breakdowns. Students also set goals for themselves through their individual learning plans. However, there remain opportunities to encourage students to take greater responsibility for the quality of their own learning by engaging them more extensively in recognizing, measuring and celebrating their own progress and achievement.

Domain 3: Curriculum

The quality of the curriculum meets expectations in most key areas but requires continued monitoring and support.

In line with its mission and vision, the school is moving towards learning in a holistic, interdisciplinary, experiential model, based on real life worldviews where cultural revitalization and environmental stewardship are highly valued. This is based on best practice research for Native American students and requires moving away from what is seen from the students' perspective as a superficial breakdown of learning by subjects. This work is being carried out in conjunction with community members. At the same time, the school is aware of the need to ensure that the curriculum also incorporates the state standards and enables students to meet graduation requirements. To achieve this, courses should be planned in terms of student outcomes. This includes the skills and understanding to be developed, as well as the knowledge base required to underpin them. In designing courses for holistic, experiential learning, consideration should also be given as to how student interests will be identified and pursued. This is to enable and promote student choice, while maintaining the focus on intended outcomes. A key component of this is to decide how all of the knowledge and understanding gained by individual students is to be shared through the group. In addition, the school should engage with the district and other partners, to determine how students' broader successes can be recognized and publicized.

The school supplements its core mathematics program with a teacher-designed curriculum that addresses individual strands and student needs. There is an increasing and deliberate focus on teaching mathematics vocabulary and language. The school attempts to make reading more relevant to students by making the material used culturally relevant and by teaching reading using indigenous methods and pedagogy. A variety of genres, high interest, and cultural literature are used to support reading comprehension and vocabulary building. There is a concentration on content vocabulary to support comprehension, demonstrated through study logs, written analysis and artistic expression. Students are encouraged to read at home with the assistance of a family elder. This is in an attempt to re-establish the multi-generational connection so essential to traditional Native American culture, as well as building students' reading stamina.

Students needing extra help academically are encouraged to stay after school to work with their teachers. The school also works in partnership with Little Earth, the local urban housing complex with American Indian preference, and the after school tutoring program established there. Given the attendance patterns of many students, the school should attempt to develop strategies that enable students to more quickly catch up any work missed so as to engage more quickly and successfully with the ideas underpinning their current class. While not condoning poor attendance patterns, it would also be useful to establish a concept of 'assignment while on location' to maintain connection with the school and the idea of ongoing learning while students are away. Indeed, this activity could also contribute to students' success portfolios.

Domain 4: Leadership, Management and the Use of Data

The quality of the leadership, management and use of data meets expectations in most key areas but requires continued monitoring and support.

The executive director and lead teacher have created a vision for the continuous development of the school, which is increasingly strategic. There is evidence of improvement over the last few years which has resulted from greater stability of staff. A significant part of this is the contribution made by the lead teacher and the focus on developing the curriculum and the quality of learning. Teachers embrace this vision of high expectations for improving the school and demonstrate a commitment to the school's mission and improving the life chances of the students. The school runs smoothly as core procedures are in place, and are understood and adhered to by teachers, as well as by most students. The building does not have the appearance of a traditional school and this helps to establish a level of trust with students and families that has sometimes been missing to date. The building is used effectively, with the garden and murals aiding the strong sense of identity and community. The staff meets twice a week to discuss students, to reflect on individual needs and agree possible strategies for moving forward. Regular meetings are also used throughout each quarter to plan school-wide themes and to share ideas. This is leading to a good sense of collaboration and team work and a shared commitment to succeed. These meetings are also providing a good vehicle for continuing and on-going professional development. In addition, teachers each attend specific trainings each year and are encouraged to take extra classes in their content areas. Overall, there is satisfactory access to professional development, which is appropriately aligned to teachers' needs and whole school improvement needs.

School leaders are working on a process that will build on current practice to allow staff, in a deliberate, collaborative manner, to work on their teaching as individuals, as well as for the school as a whole. Focused classroom observations and feedback by peers, as well as the administration, should be a key component in supporting teachers more extensively to build their pedagogy and practice. School leaders collect and analyze what data is available in an attempt to evaluate and monitor student and teacher outcomes. However, the data often has little statistical significance and does not always capture the full extent of student progress and growth. More clearly defining the characteristics, skills and understanding of a successful student and how such success will be measured and captured would enable school leaders to collect and analyze more meaningful data to monitor outcomes. In addition, more meaningful data would support the development of more appropriate measurable benchmarks to be incorporated into the school improvement plan. The executive director and lead teacher have a good sense of the strengths and development needs of the school. They have built good capacity to move it further in meeting the academic and social needs of its student population.

Domain 5: School Culture

The quality of the school's culture meets expectations in most key areas but requires continued monitoring and support.

Students' personal and educational well-being is central to the school's mission and great importance is placed on building relationships and community. This is inclusive of the staff, as well as students and their families. As a result, positive relationships are evident throughout the school and are built upon mutual respect, care and dignity. For the most part, this is coupled with high expectations for students' social and academic growth. The promotion of equality of opportunity, cultural understanding and respect, and a sense of fairness is very good. Consequently, the school climate is nurturing and supports learning well. Students behave well so that the school has minimal classroom management issues and students work cooperatively with each other as well as with the staff. Older students demonstrate their understanding of the importance of respect for individual and community by modeling this behavior for younger and new students. Some students develop a good level of personal maturity, although many continue to face significant challenges in balancing school and external demands. The school has a student leadership council and these students are active in supporting and generating the positive school culture. They take a lead on ensuring a general atmosphere of respect; as well as demonstrating respect of property and a respect of elders. This encourages students' sense of place, safety, and comfort within the building.

The school expects a coordinated effort on the part of all staff to improve student attendance. This includes phone calls home each morning if students are not present and frequent home visits. There is an emphasis on relationship building activities with families and students including ceremonies and feasts, as well as incentives such as surprise breakfasts, trips, attendance awards and surprise giveaways. The school has established a lunch every 6 weeks for students reaching 85 percent attendance. The attendance level was initially established to make it an attainable goal for students to reach, with the intention of raising the bar as more students do so. Nevertheless, improving attendance remains a major priority. The school is looking to appoint a family engagement worker for next academic year. The sole responsibility will be to partner with families to increase attendance and parent/elder participation in the school. Even so, the school could usefully look to develop strategies that provide greater learning continuity for students with poor attendance patterns, while not being seen to condone those patterns.

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.

The school is very community and relationship oriented and parents are welcome at all times. The school finds it difficult to engage families, but works hard to do so and to overcome a history of mistrust and uncertainty. The school has established itself with the wider community and holds a number of activities to do so with individual parents and families. The school has made progress in getting parents involved and can demonstrate an increasing number who stop by. A core group of active parents attends school functions and communicates regularly with the school. Parents are regularly invited to join field trips and are encouraged to work with the school on its community garden. The school is planning a monthly parent/elders group which is intended to strengthen the partnership further. The school holds feasts three times a year, in spring, winter, and fall. The recent spring feast saw the largest turnout of families to date. The fall feast is used to explain the school program and to emphasize the right of parents and guardians to be involved in their child's education. The school also takes the opportunity during these occasions to inform families about standards, the curriculum and assessments.

Meetings and conferences are held at different times during the day to encourage family participation. Discussions with parents during student registration are used to receive their input and to explain the

respective roles of home and school. All families are asked to sign a compact that describes the responsibilities of the school, the student, and the family in promoting academic achievement. The small staff makes it possible to keep them informed and engage them in planning and implementing activities involving parents collectively. Quarterly credit reports are provided to families and these are supplemented with regular telephone conversations, as well as at activities and gatherings. The school provides materials and training to assist families in helping with school work during conferencing and home visits. The school also works in cooperation with the Little Earth of United Tribes targeted mentoring project.

The school can demonstrate a significant rise in the number of collaborative partnerships in the community. Effective partnerships with a range of external organizations are used to extend students' academic and cultural experiences. They also broaden the range of services and support to which students have access, including additional adults volunteering in the building. For example, volunteers from Philadelphia Farms work with students on the community garden. Healthy Nations supports the school with both human and financial resources and Achieve Minneapolis visits on a regular basis. The school also works with NACC and the Healthy Choices program to provide diabetes screening and intervention.