



# Quality Review Report

**Westlake High School**

**2400 Union Road  
Atlanta  
GA 30331**

**Principal: Grant Rivera**

**Dates of review: October 5 - 6, 2011**

**Lead Reviewer: Clive Parsons**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school

<b>School Profile</b>		
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Grades:	9-12	
Student enrollment:	1911	
General education students:	1812	
Students with disabilities:	99	
Limited English students:	1	
In school suspensions (prior school year):		
Out of school suspensions (prior school year):		
Latest attendance percentage (current school year):		97%
Percentage of students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (prior school year):		52%
Ethnic make-up of the students (by percentage):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Black/African American: 99%</li> <li>▪ Asian: less than 1%</li> <li>▪ Hispanic: less than 1%</li> <li>▪ White: less than 1%</li> </ul>	

The principal is a veteran principal, although he is new to this school this academic year. The school has had a very high turnover of principals in the recent past.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- Teachers have a clear knowledge of their content, which results in alignment with the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), providing the foundation for impactful instruction.
- Students are willing to take appropriate academic risks in most classrooms because the school engenders a safe working environment, where thoughts and opinions are valued.
- The school's learning environment provides a safe, respectful and welcoming place for students to learn. This encourages and supports their personal and social development.
- The principal has clearly conveyed a vision for academic excellence to parents, students and staff. Because this vision is well thought out and effectively communicated, he has the support needed to fulfill the goal of becoming a highly achieving school.
- Many opportunities exist for personal and social development outside of the school day. These activities help to further school pride and provide an outlet for leadership, responsibility and success beyond academics.
- The administration team has quickly established routines, expectations and consequences. As a result, the school functions effectively on a day-to-day basis.
- Students believe that the school has the procedures and programs in place that will enable them to be successful and to meet their future needs.
- Students and parents value the ease of access to the administration team and teachers, which results in support being provided or issues being resolved in a timely manner.
- Many parents are actively involved in the wider aspects of the school and provide an effective advocacy for the school.
- Teachers feel valued and appreciate the professional freedoms afforded them by the administration when they are successful.

### What the school needs to improve

- Improve the capacity of instructional leadership by:
  - developing a shared understanding of the characteristics of high quality learning;
  - using this understanding to identify strengths and development needs across classrooms;
  - formulating specific, measurable next steps for teachers and monitoring their implementation.
- Improve the impact of instruction on learning by:
  - working with subject teams to establish specific academic priorities and goals
  - supporting teachers in developing the skills required to meet them through focused and targeted professional development
  - monitoring progress toward meeting the priorities and providing next steps to ensure their success.
- Urgently increase the academic progress made by students with disabilities to ensure that their achievement reaches an acceptable level by:
  - requiring all teachers to know, understand and plan to meet the individual needs of their students
  - developing the range of strategies proven to successfully meet the needs identified, including in co-taught classrooms
  - ensuring that teachers have the content knowledge required to successfully deliver the curriculum.
- Develop the impact of the work of counselors to ensure that they provide an up-to-date, high quality service for students that is fully compliant with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

#### This is a proficient school

The whole school community has seen a rapid transformation in climate, organization and leadership this year. Parents and students believe that the school had lost its way in the last few years and describe a history of teacher and administrator turnover. This resulted in a continual change in focus and direction, so that academic outcomes have not risen as they should have. Members of staff also recognize the transformation taking place, although some teachers remain more skeptical that systemic change will occur and current practices will embed sufficiently to move the school forward. The principal recognizes very clearly that the improvements that have taken place so far are the precursor to improving the impact of instruction on the quality and pace of student learning, thereby improving their achievement and academic outcomes. Consequently, the school's energies are now being turned to this end and strategic actions are already underway. Increasing the instructional leadership capacity within the school is critical to this endeavor.

Students with disabilities perform less well than their peers and do not make sufficient gains in their skills, knowledge and understanding. This is because teachers do not consistently identify the specific needs of individual students and how they plan to address them in class. Further, aspects of organization have become lax and the school does not consistently get the value that it should from scheduling two teachers with the same class. Not all parents and students believe that they are currently well served by the school's model for providing counseling. As a result, the school is embarking on a program to ensure that it is fully compliant with the ASCA National Model for counseling in providing a modern, high quality service.

While rapid progress has been made in some areas of the school, the legacy of underdevelopment remains so that, overall, the school just meets the minimum acceptable standard. The principal has rapidly gained the trust of the school community, especially parents and students and he has the skills and capacity to drive the school forward at the pace required. He is setting about this in a determined, systematic and strategic manner.

#### Criterion 1: Achievement

##### This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school did not make Adequate Yearly Progress last year. It is designated as "Needs Improvement Year 1" because Economically Disadvantaged students did not meet their goal in mathematics for the second consecutive year. While there are some improvement trends evident over the past three years, such as 9th grade literature, most indicators show a plateau or small decline. While many of the school's test scores are well below the average for the county as a whole, they are often much closer to those for the state. While overall results are not very low, those in mathematical and science subjects tend to be lower than in English and social studies. Progress is inconsistent between classes, as well as subjects. It is below expectations too often, and in a small minority of classes, well below expectations. The school does not utilize formative and summative assessments with sufficient rigor and consistency to provide timely and accurate awareness of student progress.

The performance of students with disabilities is well below that of their peers and this group of students makes slower than expected progress, often because their individual needs are not being addressed with sufficient rigor, with little evidence of accelerated learning closing the gap. Overall results in Advanced Placement (AP) tests and the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) are also not as high as they should be. Nevertheless, the school does enable many students to succeed, with a graduation rate of over 89% last year, which is above the targeted level.

The school had set long-term improvement goals for key tests as expected in its School Improvement Plan (SIP). While some of these were challenging and represented reasonable improvement from the position at that time, others lacked challenge or rationale for their establishment. There has been little discernable impact on raising student performance from the implementation of the SIP. The principal is in the process of writing a new SIP for the school.

## **Criterion 2: Learning and teaching**

### **This area of the school's work is developing.**

There are examples of accomplished teaching throughout the school, although there is much that just meets a minimum acceptable standard. However, the quality of learning in some classrooms is not yet proficient and requires improvement to meet that minimum standard. Overall, teachers have a secure knowledge of their content, so that there is broad alignment with the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). While this should provide the foundation for impactful instruction, learning objectives, in the form of essential questions, are not always effectively shared with students so that they remain unclear as to what they are trying to achieve. There are many activities where students are expected to work collaboratively, but opportunities are frequently missed to use such small group work to effectively differentiate in order to meet the diverse learning needs that are present. Strategies that require all students to fully engage in learning and that provide opportunities for teachers to check for student understanding as lessons progress are not commonplace. Similarly, what assessment information is gathered is not consistently used to inform student groupings in class or to provide targeted support for individuals in the classroom. As a result, too many students remain passive in their learning, with infrequent opportunities to engage in problem solving activities and to develop higher order thinking. Nevertheless, students are generally on task and many are eager to answer questions and to make other contributions to the class.

Students have a general sense of what they need to do to improve, based on the feedback that they receive from their teachers. However, such goals are often generic and lack the content specifics to really aid improvement. Opportunities for students to assess their own work and that of their peers are also limited. Teachers' secure content knowledge is not always used to develop questions that extend students' thinking and probe for deeper understanding. There is some appropriate use of technology, such as presentations by the teacher, but little that fully utilizes modern communication methods and provides interactive learning for students. Teachers are generally concerned to do their best for their students and are committed to doing so. However, the focus on raising achievement has been inconsistent and lacked rigor, so that its impact has not been sufficient.

## **Criterion 3: Leadership and management**

### **This area of the school's work is proficient.**

The principal has quickly established routines, expectations and consequences. As a result, everybody knows what is expected of them and most willingly comply. Consequently, the school is calm and orderly, and functions effectively on a day-to-day basis. The principal has a clear vision for academic excellence, which he has shared with the school community. Because this vision is well thought out and effectively communicated, he has the support needed to fulfill the goal of becoming a highly achieving school. Parents and students are excited by the changes that have already taken place, describing the school as a very different place to that in operation last year. However, some staff, as a result of the school's very high turnover of principals, find it difficult to commit fully to the vision at the present time. Nevertheless, teachers feel valued and appreciate the professional freedoms afforded them by the administration when they are successful in aiding student achievement.

The principal is quickly and correctly turning the school's attention to improving the impact of instruction on learning. There is an appropriate sense of urgency and determination in this next step, together with a commitment to engaging all teachers in the process. The school has not been strong on utilizing data to support improvement for individual students, classrooms or subjects, or for

the school as a whole. The principal has started to engage teachers in the process of identifying the academic priorities for their area, the data necessary to monitor student progress and the support needed to ensure improved achievement. He is also developing a new School Improvement Plan to drive the school forward. At present, other than the principal, teachers have little sense of where instructional leadership lies. Building such leadership, including through the assistant principals, is central to improving classroom practices. While there are exceptions, teachers have not been provided sufficiently with focused feedback and targeted next steps resulting from observations of classrooms and student work. Consequently, there has been insufficient strategic support and targeted professional development for improving classroom practice.

#### **Criterion 4: Curriculum**

**This area of the school's work is proficient.**

Teachers use state and national standards to guide their planning, although their delivery does not always reflect the rigor expected of the program. As a result, delivery does not always match the planned intent. Similarly, teachers' formative assessments are not sufficiently standards based. There is some use of data to monitor student progress and provide interventions and additional support, usually outside of the classroom. As a result, the impact on changing classroom practice and strengthening differentiation is limited. Strengthening the rigor, consistency and impact of teacher collaboration is a key next step starting to be enacted by the principal. Students have access to a wide range of courses and programs, although they are not always confident about which pathway they are following. Overall, students believe that the school has the procedures and programs in place that will enable them to be successful and to meet their future needs. A wide range of clubs and after school activities provides opportunities for students to further their individual interests and talents. Homework is a general feature for students, although this can be finishing off work from class, rather than extending learning or exploring new ideas.

Parents and students see the school's magnet program as providing a good range of additional experiences that extend learning outside of the classroom. They would want to see such opportunities being more extensive for those students not in the program. In general, students and parents would like the best aspects of the magnet program to become the norm for the school. Students report that there have been considerable issues with their schedules in the past, resulting in inappropriate classes having to be taken. Much energy has been put into resolving such issues at the start of this school year in a more effective and timely manner. Students do not believe that they have had access to sufficient advice and guidance to prepare them for college and to be successful once they are there. A college counselor has just been hired as the school moves quickly to fill this gap. In general, students and parents want to see more timely and impactful access to the school's counseling service. Consequently, the school is embarking on an aggressive program to ensure that the counseling service meets the full expectations of the ASCA National Model as quickly as possible.

#### **Criterion 5: School Culture and Personal Development**

**This area of the school's work is proficient.**

The whole school community recognizes the rapid improvement achieved in culture and climate. They see raised expectations, increased accountability and more rigorous monitoring of those expectations. As a result, the school now provides a safe, respectful and welcoming learning environment which encourages and supports students' personal and social development. Students are willing to take appropriate academic risks in most classrooms, because ideas and opinions are valued. This provides a strong foundation for students to receive constructive and developmental feedback from their teachers. It also provides a strong foundation for students to engage in self and peer assessment, although such opportunities are insufficiently common. The physical environment in classrooms is not consistently utilized to promote and reflect high expectations and to support students in understanding and developing their work.

While the school is highly focused on the 5% of students who find it more difficult to engage constructively, this minority is not being allowed to divert energy from the vast majority who want to comply and succeed. Students and parents value the ease of access that they now have to the administration team and teachers, which results in support being provided or issues being resolved in a much timelier manner. Many classroom activities expect students to work collaboratively, which the vast majority do willingly and with enthusiasm. Many opportunities exist for personal and social development outside of the school day. These activities help to further school pride and provide an outlet for leadership, responsibility and success beyond academics. The school has a strong focus on attendance, which is at a good level. Tardiness to class has reduced considerably as the school's routines and expectations have strengthened, although there remain some classrooms where there is still room for growth.

## **Criterion 6: Involvement of parents/guardians and the community**

**This area of the school's work is proficient.**

Parents recognize that the administration and teachers are now much more accessible and responsive to them. They believe that communication is increasingly two-way, although they can also point to variation and inconsistency. Some teachers have websites which are very useful for keeping parents informed of assignments, as well as providing additional background information and support for students. Families can access current grades electronically, although these are not always as up-to-date as they would like. Individual communication is happening in a timelier manner, so that issues can be resolved before they escalate. Parents also report receiving phone calls or emails to report good things happening and to celebrate success. More generally, parents would want to see more opportunities for collectively celebrating success and encouraging students and their families.

A solid core of parents is actively involved in the wider aspects of the school. Many provide an effective advocacy for the school and work to further its school's standing and progress, in addition to being advocates for their own children. They have brought into helping the pockets of excellence that they see around the school become the school-wide norm, rather than exceptions. Parents have been active in launching a new school website, to be more informative and to reach out to more families. They are also active members of the Local School Advisory Council (LSAC) and a strong functioning Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA). The school also has some strong partnerships with the local community, which extends opportunities for students. However, parents would welcome further activities that get students into the local community, including partnering with local middle and elementary schools. Students themselves would like to see transition from middle school strengthened.