

# COVENTRY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Coventry, Rhode Island

## A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

November 1997

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### CONTENTS

- [1. THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMIT](#)
- [2. OVERVIEW OF TEAM'S FINDINGS](#)
  - [Profile of the School](#)
  - [Portrait of Coventry Middle School at the Time of the Visit](#)
- [3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT](#)
  - [Conclusions](#)
  - [Commendations](#)
  - [Recommendations for Improvement](#)
- [4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING](#)
  - [Conclusions](#)
  - [Commendations](#)
  - [Recommendations for Improvement](#)
- [5. FINDINGS ON COVENTRY MIDDLE SCHOOL AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY](#)
  - [Conclusions](#)
  - [Commendations](#)

- [Recommendations for Improvement](#)
- [6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS](#)
  - [Most Important Commendations](#)
  - [Most Important Recommendations](#)
- [APPENDIX A: Members of the Visitation Team](#)
- [Addendum to the Report of the SALT Visiting Team to Coventry Middle School](#)

## **1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMIT**

The purpose of the visit to Coventry Middle School during the week of November 17, 1997 was to draw conclusions about the school in these three areas: student learning progress and achievement; teaching and learning; and the school as a learning community. The goal of this visit was to ensure that school-based accountability leads to improvement in student achievement. This is the most important aspect of SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching). The report that Coventry's Self-Study Team prepared for the visit served as the Visiting Team's first touchstone in coming to an understanding of Coventry Middle School. The team based its conclusions on the analysis of the evidence it collected during the three day visit. The visit included 112 extended classroom observations as well as interviews and discussions with most of the school's teachers and staff, school and district administrators, and students and parents. Shadowing a student for a day; observing meetings in progress; reviewing the Coventry Self-Study report including information from the Hi Places A Survey; and analyzing the standardized test Scores in detail helped the team further.

All of the conclusions, commendations and recommendations in this report were agreed to by team, consensus, following in depth discussions that considered the evidence from the visit.

Members of the visiting team, whose names and affiliations are included in Appendix

A, are middle school teachers and administrators, parents of 10-14 year-olds, and staff from the Rhode Island Department of Education.

This report reflects a moment in the life of Coventry Middle School. Although charts and graphs may be informative, there is simply no substitute for being there--in the classroom, in the lunchroom, in the school yard. The specific information generated by an actual on-site visit, with students, staff, parents, and administrators going about their day, is not only focused to help improve schools, but to place that information within a larger context that gives it meaning at that site. Thus, a visit allows a colleague to live through a teaching event with a teacher, to find common ground, and to form judgments that will

result in support strategies for teaching and learning.

On the following pages, the specific focus areas are laid out, each with their own introductory sections. These introductions explain the methodology and present the team's conclusions in each area. The commendations and recommendations that follow from the conclusions are then presented.

## **2. OVERVIEW OF TEAM'S FINDINGS**

### **Profile of the School**

Coventry Middle School is a suburban/rural middle school for children in seventh and eighth grade. The school services children from six community elementary schools, and prepares students to continue their secondary education at either the local high school or the career and technical facility. The school board is elected by the citizens of the town, and operates with an independent administrative department.

The 858 students in attendance are organized into academic teams arranged heterogeneously by grade level. Students stay with this team for their core subjects and quarter courses then select elective subjects. Each team is assigned approximately 10 students. There are 49 classroom teachers, 14 full-time and 2 part-time special resource teachers/specialists, 31 administrators, and 23) paraprofessionals and/or members of the support staff.

Coventry Middle School operates on a six period day with no bells, and each team develops their own flexible schedule to meet their instructional needs. The library is flexibly scheduled and staffed throughout the day. The computer room, however, is flexibly scheduled, but not staffed throughout the day. In addition, the school offers an array of diverse programs and activities for students and the community.

### **Portrait of Coventry Middle School at the Time of the Visit**

Coventry Middle School has been a Carnegie School for the past seven years. During this time, the principles of *Turning Points* have served as a guide to faculty, staff, and administration on their Journey from "junior high" to "middle school". The dedication and caring of staff and faculty has made the journey a safe one, and brought them to a place where students come first, and every individual in the learning community is valued and given a voice.

This hard work has laid the foundation for evolving into a true "middle school". Supplied with the

information from your self-studies, as well as the insights offered in this report, the SALT Team believes it is time for the members of the Coventry Middle School community, to stop, reflect on where you are, where you want to go, and how you will proceed on the path to becoming a fully actualized middle school focused on achieving academic excellence.

### **3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT**

To form conclusions in the area of student learning, progress and achievement. the SALT Visiting Team considered three issues. First, the team looked at the question posed in Coventry's SALT Self-Study, "Test scores are static and/or fluctuating slightly up or down. Why are they not better in light of seven years of implementing *Turning Points* agenda?" We then analyzed the state assessment results for the school since 1993. Second, the team considered how well students are succeeding in the areas of social, personal, and intellectual growth. Third, we considered how well the school uses information about students' progress and achievement for the development and modification of classroom practice, curriculum design, school management and planning.

#### **Conclusions**

Coventry Middle School students are happy, healthy, cooperative, well behaved and enthusiastic. Clearly, students are poised for learning, however, there is little evidence they are challenged consistently in the academic areas. The following comment by a parent of a Coventry Middle School student accurately reflected the view of the visiting team, "Don't accept average. Strive for excellence so all reach their potential."

While there are important limits in the methods of standardized testing, the results of Coventry Middle School's MAT 7 test warrant further consideration by the school. These results are not static. Although above state levels, results since 1993 indicate a trend downward, moving the school, closer to state levels, and away from the school's previous advantage (See Appendix B).

The school does not effectively use the range of assessment and performance information about how well students are learning.

#### **Commendations**

The school faculty, staff, and administration have done an effective job in reducing student suspensions and disruptive behavior.

Coventry Middle School students are comfortable and take great pride in their school; this reflects the dedication and hard work of a caring staff.

## **Recommendations for Improvement**

Connect standards, curriculum, assessment, and classroom practices in order to improve student achievement.

Identify criteria to assess student work to determine whether or not students are meeting or exceeding set standards.

Narrow the focus of the school's professional development initiatives to the school's primary responsibility -- the implementation of effective teaching that ensures student learning, progress, and achievement

Use standards as a guide to build challenging curricula that specifies what students need to know, and be able to do, by the completion of 7th and 8th grade.

Faculty, on a school wide basis, should design and use authentic assessments of student performance aligned with standards.

Assessment information should provoke faculty discussion about classroom practice, student progress, and curriculum design which shifts the focus away from programs and onto students.

The school should reexamine all existing test/assessment/performance results to see if they suggest patterns that could be considered in its effort to improve student learning. Some suggestions for further inquiry are:

- Secure disaggregated results from RIDE to see if unusual gaps exist between groups of students (e.g. boys and girls).
- Examine 4th grade scores that may indicate important gaps in student achievement (e.g. elementary school attended).
- Compare this year's 8th grade class results with their 4th grade results.
- Pay attention and respond to the drop in MAT scores in '95 and '96 in math. The drop is large and occurred two years in a row.
- Use new standard reference exam results in mathematics to guide curriculum revision.

## **4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING**

SALT is based upon the premise that the purpose of school accountability is to improve teaching and learning. Therefore, the majority of our time was spent in classrooms--nearly every teacher was visited and over 112 classroom observations were made. No classroom visit was less than fifteen minutes in length and more than 90% of these visits were for the entire teaching period. These observations were supplemented by focused interviews, conversations with students, parents, school and district administrators, and a review of student work and internal documents, including the SALT Self-Study. The conclusions presented here are built upon thorough team discussion and consensus. Using this evidence the visiting team offers the following:

## **Conclusions**

The Reading, Writing, Drama Workshop program is exemplary and fills a schoolwide need to give all students the opportunity to read, write, and be challenged in a way that is not consistently implemented throughout the school.

Standards have not been implemented schoolwide.

Computers, technology, and manipulatives are underutilized.

The teaming has not sufficiently transformed the pedagogy. Classroom instruction continues to be characterized by discrete activities rather than a coherent approach to teaching and learning which teaming can lead to,

Expectations and criteria are not consistently communicated to students or parents.

With some exceptions, classroom practices do not push students enough to think with rigor, invention and persistence. Teaching practices do not build the intrinsic values required for being a lifelong. One 7th grade student's comment reflected the overall view of the team by saying, "The teachers here are nice, but they don't ask enough of us."

The school identifies broad content standards, but lacks specific exit outcomes for each grade level in all subjects.

The school has not identified criteria to assess student work to determine whether or not students are being motivated and meeting the set standards.

Faculty employs a relatively narrow range of teaching practices which tend to be teacher centered rather than student centered.

## **Commendations**

The development and implementation of the Reading, Writing, and Drama Workshop program is exemplary.

The majority of students feel connected to at least one adult in the building.

The inclusion program meets the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

## **Recommendations for Improvement**

Revise your curricula to align with national or state standards.

Disciplines rather than teams shall determine what is to be taught at each grade level so that the curriculum is aligned with the new standards.

Use the teachers within this building who are challenging all their students as models and mentors.

Employ a wider repertoire of teaching practices to motivate students to achieve or exceed the standards.

## **5. FINDINGS ON COVENTRY MIDDLE SCHOOL AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY**

To consider the issue of Coventry Middle School as a community of learners, the visiting team immersed itself in the life of the school for three days, and gathered evidence from all the sources previously mentioned. The team attended meetings with members of the school community including: Special Services, the School Improvement Team, parents, school and district administrators, the self-study team, teachers, support personnel, and team leaders.

## **Conclusions**

The school, through its diverse activities and programs for students and the community, plays an essential role in Coventry.

The faculty has established an outstanding rapport with students.

The Special Needs Program is providing a wide range of appropriate learning opportunities and services.

School leadership is effective and the organization functions well,

The district has been below the state average in total per pupil expenditure. As a result, there is inadequate financial support for the middle school.

Professional Development should be less "busy" and focus on actual teaching practice and student performance.

Student behaviors are dealt with in a purposeful manner designed to keep kids in school.

Mutual respect permeates parent, faculty, and student relationships.

Faculty and staff demonstrate an outstanding commitment to the students and their school.

There is confusion about the purpose, value, and implementation of heterogeneous grouping.

While the school has been diligent in establishing new uses of time, such as the study skills period, scheduling remains an obstacle to becoming a fully operational middle school.

There is conflicting evidence regarding effective K -- 12 articulation.

## **Commendations**

The faculty is truly caring and dedicated.

The inspiring leadership is highly respected and effective.

The ongoing communication with parents is commendable.

The library enhances student learning across the curriculum.

## **Recommendations for Improvement**

More planning time is needed to effectively implement the Turning Point recommendations so that student achievement improves.

Increase communication between elective and quarter teachers to support classroom activities.

Focus professional development so classroom practices change.

Professional development should be directed at improving classroom teaching and student learning.

## **6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The members of the Coventry Middle School community have journeyed far in their efforts to become a true “middle school”. The dedication and hard work of a caring faculty and staff, guided by truly effective leadership have created a positive learning environment where students are ready to achieve. Now, supplied with the information available from the Rhode Island Department of Education, the Coventry Middle School Self-Study, and this report, the school stands ready to take the next step on the path towards excellence.

### **Most Important Commendations**

Nearly all the commendations cited in this report spring from one of the school's most valuable resources--its dedicated faculty, staff, and leadership. The positive learning environment which has been established at Coventry Middle School is directly attributable to your hard work. A continuation of the intense effort and energy devoted by this staff, sharply focused on the recommendations for improvement, will undoubtedly result in the changes necessary to meet the challenges facing Coventry Middle School.

### **Most Important Recommendations**

Coventry Middle School is a good school, capable of great things. In order for the school to achieve academic excellence at the level of its potential, it is essential to connect standards, curriculum, assessment and classroom practices to improve student achievement. Once standards have been set., and the curriculum designed accordingly, it is necessary for the school to identify appropriate criteria to assess student work in order to determine whether or not students are meeting or exceeding the standards.

The lack of student motivation referred to in the school's self-study should be viewed as a message from the students for a greater voice in classroom practices. The team found most students, including those who appeared unmotivated, to be ready for more challenge. A wider repertoire of teaching practices which better utilize technology and manipulatives will help stimulate students to achieve or surpass the standards.

Lastly, the school needs to concentrate its energy on the implementation of these recommendations. This can be accomplished, in part, by narrowing the focus of professional development onto effective teaching practices which ensure student learning, progress and achievement. Also, better use should be made of the resources available at the Department of Education and within the walls of Coventry Middle School itself. Use the teachers who are already challenging all their students as models and mentors to complete the journey you have undertaken on the road to excellence in education.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **MEMBERS OF THE VISITATION TEAM**

Lynn Abbott, Teacher, UCAP, Providence

Anne Faris, Parent, Bristol-Warren

Vincent Giuliano, Principal, Gaudet Middle School, Middletown

Susan Rotblat-Walker, Rhode Island Department of Education

Anna Saccoccio, Teacher, Nathanael Greene Middle School, Providence

Diane Schaefer, Rhode Island Department of Education

\*Catherine Schulbaum, Teacher, Ponaganset Middle School, Foster-Glocester

Charles Sweeney, Teacher, Kickemuit Middle School, Bristol-Warren

+Thomas Wilson, Principal Consultant, SALT

\* Indicates Chair of the Visiting Team

+ Indicates Coach to the Visit. Not a "voting" member of the Team

**ADDENDUM  
TO THE REPORT OF THE  
SALT VISITING TEAM TO COVENTRY MIDDLE SCHOOL**

**Page 8 Bullet #2**

We are well aware of the drop in the MAT scores for 95 and 96 as we identified this as an area of concern for us. This information was documented in our self study which the visiting team received prior to their visit. We request that the bullet be amended to read, "Continue to pay attention and respond to the drop in MAT scores in '95 and '96 in math."

As the language stands, it would appear that we were not only unaware of this decline, but also did not plan to do anything about it.

**Page 9 Paragraph 5, Sentence 2**

While we understand the viewpoint of the visiting team is a "snapshot of our school", we respectfully disagree that, "faculty employs a relatively narrow range of teaching practices". Instruction is diverse and consistently varied to provide hands-on, alternative approaches to learning. While teachers do, in fact, provide direct instruction, there is plenty of evidence to support the use of strategies such as cooperative learning, pair-share, learning stations, labs, conferencing with students and the use of multiple intelligence to address students' learning needs.

**Page 10 Recommendations for Improvement**

The core subject areas do, in fact, "determine what is to be taught at each grade level." Through a process of curriculum mapping, teams plan integrated units on topics which emanate from the curriculum of separate subject areas. Even when formal integration is not taking place, teachers purposefully overlap their curriculum so as to make meaningful connections for students.