

UCAP

URBAN COLLABORATIVE ACCELERATED PROGRAM

Providence, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE PROGRAM

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

October 1998

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

UCAP is beginning its tenth year in servicing middle school, at-risk students from Providence, Pawtucket, East Providence and Central Falls. The UCAP staff of 15 full time people includes core-area teachers, an administrator, specialists, and support staff. UCAP is organized as a not-for profit independent public school. Its Board of Directors is made up of the superintendents of the four sending districts.

The UCAP mission is to work with students who have repeated at least one grade and to accelerate their education so that they regain lost years and return to their districts with the skills and attitudes necessary

for success. The 126 students who have chosen UCAP represent a diverse population.

Ninety percent of UCAP's annual operating budget comes from enrollment tuition paid by sending districts. The remaining sources of income include grants and individual and corporate contributions. UCAP owns a well maintained facility which allows UCAP to provide expanded and more suitable learning space for middle-school students.

The Nature of this Report

The purpose of the visit to UCAP from October 27th to October 30th, 1998 was to draw conclusions about the Program in the three focus areas of SALT: Student Learning, Progress and Achievement; Teaching and Learning, and The School as a Teaching and Learning Organization. The purpose of the SALT Visit is to ensure that accountability supports improvement of schools by directly connecting judgments of quality and recommendations for improvement to the actual life and work of a school.

This report of the visiting Team is built upon the observations and conclusions of Rhode Island school practitioners. The majority of the members of the Visiting Team, whose names and affiliations are included in Appendix A, are practicing Rhode Island educators. Two team members are teachers on leave and serving as staff members of the Rhode Island Department of Education.

UCAP's Self Study and SALT Book (prepared in the fall of 1998 as part of the school's work as a pilot school), served as the Visiting Team's first touchstone in coming to an understanding of the School.

However informative written reports may be, there is simply no substitute for being at the school while it is in session ? in the classroom, in the lunchroom, on the playground and in the hallways. The specific information generated by a Team visit is about how the students and staff, parents and administrators go about their day. Thus, this visit allowed professional colleagues and stakeholders to build informed judgments about the teaching and learning that actually takes place at UCAP.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- UCAP Self-study and SALT Book (1998)
- a total of 103 hours of classroom observation. Every classroom teacher was observed more than once.
- many informal observations in and around the school
- State assessment results
- following eleven students for a full day
- observation of the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- observation of a full staff meeting
- meetings and conversations with the SALT Committee
- observation of the Board of Directors meeting

- meetings and conversations with students and parents,
- “Information about Present and Past Students of UCAP” (May 1998)
- SALT Survey Report 1998, Carnegie Self Study (1996 and 1997)
- a selection of student work collected by the school

The conclusions, commendations and recommendations presented here were built by the full Team through intense and thorough discussions. The Visiting Team met for a total of 23 hours in six separate meetings spanning the four days of the visit. This time is exclusive of the time spent in classrooms and with teachers. The Team sought to develop conclusions, commendations and recommendations in the three focus areas that, in its judgment, would be helpful to the school as it works to improve teaching and learning.

Each conclusion, each commendation, and each recommendation in this report was agreed to by the Team using consensus.

It is important to note that this report reflects a "moment" in the life of the school. The conclusions here are different from those that can be made from state-wide assessment data or from information collected and analyzed by members of the school. This report is not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, it is a different lens, one not already clouded from being entrenched in the daily life of the school. This new lens is one through which the school can look to help focus on important issues resulting in the development of strategies for overall improvement in the teaching and learning process.

The value of this report is not determined by the hard work of the Team. The value will be determined by how people respond to the report. At first, the critical criteria will be the thoughtfulness of that response and later it will be its actual effectiveness in improving teaching and learning. The response of the faculty and staff will be most critical early on but later there is a shared responsibility to support the school in making progress. The supporting School Departments, the citizens of the communities served by UCAP, and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility. The SALT Visit and this report are part of a pilot process for SALT. UCAP has served for the last two years as a SALT pilot school and the school, its board, faculty and principal are to be commended for the leadership they have shown by their willingness to take part in this process.

Following the Team's summary statement, Portrait of the Condition of UCAP at the Time of the Visit, Team conclusions, commendations and recommendations are presented for each of the SALT focus areas. The report continues with the Team's most important commendations and recommendations and concludes with the Team's final advice to the school.

2. PORTRAIT OF THE CONDITION OF YOUR SCHOOL AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

UCAP creates a safe and nurturing environment that encourages its diverse, at-risk middle school students to remain in school and take responsibility for themselves and their learning.

UCAP has chosen to make the school fit the students rather than expecting the students to fit the school.

Having greatly improved individual student attendance, UCAP is well positioned to address the many challenges of translating attendance into effective learning experiences.

The UCAP challenge is to complete its unfinished academic agenda without jeopardizing what has been achieved.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- State assessment results
- Following students
- Examination of student work
- Classroom observations
- Teacher interviews
- Evaluation reports
- Conversations with students
- “Information about Present and Past Students of UCAP” (May 1998)
- Self-Study and SALT Book

Conclusions

Students demonstrate a positive commitment to the school community, a respect for its democratic governance and a pride in its uniqueness. (Classroom and school observations, conversations with faculty and students)

State assessment results indicate significant gaps in student achievement. (1998 State Assessment results)

There is insufficient data in state reports to identify equity gaps. (1998 State Assessment results)

Requiring target setting based on state assessments is counter productive to the mission of the school as it could serve as an incentive to choose higher performing students. (SALT Book, State assessment

results; conversations with teachers and staff)

While UCAP measures student progress in various ways, the UCAP criteria for acceleration is neither consistently clear nor rigorously applied. This makes it difficult for some students to produce quality work, fulfill expectations and achieve their goals. (Examination of student work, classroom observations)

As noted in UCAP's self-study "students do not maintain focus and effort" which distracts them from producing high quality work. (Self-Study, classroom observations)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that UCAP:

Align UCAP curriculum to the OATS framework and state assessments without losing the focus on student needs.

Consider how state assessment and SALT survey information can help improve instruction.

Address classroom behavior policies and practices to increase student focus and effort on learning.

Raise expectations for students' academic performance and increase the academic rigor in all learning activities.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that RIDE:

Work closely with UCAP to design assessment scheduling and policies to meet both RIDE's and UCAP's objectives.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- 98 State Assessment Results
- Examination of student work
- Classroom observations
- Following students
- Meetings with teachers, students
- Conversations with teachers and students
- Self-Study and SALT Book

Conclusions

UCAP teachers are extraordinary in their dedication and concern, forming trusting relationships that are positive and supportive with their students. (Classroom and school observations, meetings and conversations with teachers and students)

UCAP teachers face many difficult challenges due to the unique student population and the mission of the program. (Classroom observations, following students)

Expectations for classroom behavior and academic performance vary from class to class, distracting students and teachers from their work. (Classroom observations, following students)

The lack of challenge and rigor in the curriculum contributes to uneven student engagement and learning. (Classroom observations and examination of student work)

Although teachers spend considerable time and effort developing curricular units, the basic academic needs of the students are not given adequate consideration. (Classroom observations, conversation with teachers and students)

The school's focus on acceleration too often overshadows real learning and the production of quality work. (Examination of student work and classroom observations)

The well designed schedule offers more time for academic classes, but too often it is not fully taken advantage of by teachers in practice. (Classroom observations, conversations with teachers)

There is not enough direct teacher involvement in the learning process. (Following students, classroom observations)

Teachers too often miss teachable moments -- opportunities to clarify, to correct and to increase student knowledge, understanding and skills. (Classroom observations, following students)

The SALT Visiting Team commends UCAP for:

The passion of teachers and staff for their mission

Celebrating and embracing the diversity of their students

The time and effort spent on creating student learning materials

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that UCAP:

Redesign criteria to emphasize quality as well as acceleration.

Increase the effectiveness of direct instruction – whole class, group and individual -- as an important teaching strategy.

Expect and demand more of students so that each student is challenged on a constant and consistent basis.

Identify the gaps in basic academic skills and use them as the basis for all curriculum development.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom and school observations
- Meetings and conversations with teachers and staff
- Meeting and conversation with parents
- Meeting and conversation with students
- Observation of board meeting
- Observation of faculty and team meetings
- Conversation with controller
- Self study, SALT Book
- “Information about Present and Past Students of UCAP” (May 1998)
- Review of school policies and publications

Conclusions

Rob DeBlois, Director of UCAP, has been the central force in the creation, growth and success of the program earning him the love and respect of the UCAP community. (Observation of faculty meeting, conversations with teachers, parents and students)

UCAP staff uses site-based management to promote the school’s mission of attaining student academic and social skills. (Observation of faculty and team meetings, conversations with teachers)

UCAP staff and faculty are engaged in ongoing high level dialogue relevant to the mission of the school and the needs of the students, leading to continuous program evolution. (Conversations with teachers,

teacher meetings)

A variety of professional development opportunities are effectively tied to identified needs of the learning community. (Classroom observations, SALT Book)

The structure and practice of the discipline committee encourages all students to take responsibility for their own behavior and fosters taking responsibility for each other resulting in a safe, respectful responsible community across the diverse groups that make up UCAP. (Classroom and school observations, meeting of Discipline Committee)

UCAP is persistent in attempting to engage parents during the admission, advisory and discipline processes. (Self-study, parents' meeting)

UCAP's procedures for selecting students and supporting their transitions to district schools are well thought out and executed. (SALT Book, conversations with staff)

The SALT Visiting Team commends UCAP for:

Courage and professional integrity in selecting students who most need the program in spite of challenges and low test scores

Advisories that insure that at least one adult knows and cares about each student's welfare and progress

Sharing responsibility to make site-based management work effectively in the interests of students

Attracting and securing significant funding from varied public and private sources

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that UCAP:

Ensure future leadership of the UCAP program.

Expand its professional dialogue to address teaching basic skills and promoting higher order skills.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that UCAP's School Districts:

Increase their understanding of the ideas and practices that UCAP offers in the education of at risk students.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Commendations

The passion of teachers and staff for their mission

Courage and professional integrity in selecting students who most need the program in spite of challenges and low test scores

Sharing responsibility to make site-based management work effectively in the interests of students

Most Important Recommendations

Raise expectations for students' academic performance and increase the academic rigor in all learning activities.

Increase the effectiveness of direct instruction – whole class, group and individual -- as an important teaching strategy.

Identify the gaps in basic academic skills and use them as the basis for all curriculum development.

Address classroom behavior policies and practices to increase student focus and effort on learning.

Final Advice to the School

A UCAP staff member summed it up best for this SALT Team,

“My life is more important because of the time I have spent here.”

This school has tackled important educational challenges with passion and skill. The pride of teachers and students in UCAP is highly evident.

Increase the celebration of diversity in all your classrooms. Build stronger connections to your students' worlds. Help students find connections between their dreams and aspirations and the world they are about to enter. Make commitments to what matters most to your students with skill, thoughtfulness and caring. Work to build stronger basic skills and competencies in your students, ones that will allow them to be successful when they leave your care.

Continue to ensure that your students know that their lives have become more important because of their time with you.

Good luck in your efforts.

The SALT Visiting Team

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF URBAN COLLABORATIVE ACCELERATED PROGRAM SALT PILOT COMMITTEE

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Kurt Barbuscio, Teacher
Chris Cuthbertson, Teacher
Brian Lemieux, Teacher
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