

ASA MESSER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Providence, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

November 1998

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

Asa Messer School and Annex is located in the West End community of Providence and comes under the jurisdiction of the Providence School Committee. It is a small neighborhood school with a population of approximately 586 students in grades pre-k to 5. The Annex is a separate building about 3 blocks from the main building. It houses most of the primary programs. The main building houses grades 2-5, an ESL first grade, and special education and ESL grade level classes. Both buildings are over one hundred years old. In this report Asa Messer Elementary School refers to both buildings.

Asa Messer has a culturally diverse population: 37% Asian, 42% Hispanic, 14 % black and 6 % white. 99% of the students are eligible for free lunch. The school provides ESL services to 39% of the children and special education services to 11%.

In his second year as principal, Frank Piccirilli, leads a staff of approximately 45 professionals. A focus teacher without classroom responsibilities provides assistance in curriculum matters, professional development, and grant writing.

The school has adopted an Ecoliteracy Curriculum and is working on alignment of the Ecoliteracy activities with the Providence OATS.

The Community Connect Program, Student of the Month Luncheon, and the Fifth Grade Graduation are provided through a partnership with the Rhode Island State Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals. In addition Asa Messer has partnerships with the South Side Community Land Trust and Johnson and Wales University. It is also working to develop other community partnerships. Students from Brown University provide enrichment activities to students in the third, fourth, and fifth grades.

The Nature of this Report

The purpose of the Visit to Asa Messer School from November 17 to November 20, 1998 was to draw conclusions about the School 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. One team member is a teacher on leave and serving as a staff member of the Rhode Island Department of Education. One team member is a parent and another is a school committee member.

Asa Messer School's Improvement Plan (prepared in the summer 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 Asa Messer Elementary School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 111 hours of classroom observation. Nearly all classroom teachers who were present were observed at least once.
- many informal observations in and around the schools
- following ten students for a full day (2 in the annex and 8 in the main building)
- observing the work of teachers, special area teachers and staff
- observing a meeting of the School Improvement Team
- meetings with the SALT Self-Study Committee
- meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators
- Asa Messer School Improvement Plan
- Draft Asa Messer Self-Study 1998
- Asa Messer History
- Ecoliteracy Curriculum
- School policies
- Providence School District test data
- 1998 Information Works! (1997 scores)
- 1998 Assessment Results
- SALT Survey Report (1997 survey)
- SIT minutes
- a large selection of student work collected by the school

The full Team has built the conclusions, commendations and recommendations presented here through intense and thorough discussions. The Visiting Team met for a total of 24 hours in six separate meetings spanning the four days of the visit. This time is exclusive of the time spent in classrooms, in meetings, 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 statewide 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 Providence School Department, the citizens of Providence, 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. Asa Messer Elementary School has served for the last two years as a SALT pilot school and the school, its School Improvement Team and the Providence School Department 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 Your School 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

Asa Messer is an aged building filled with student work and bright displays. It is a haven of caring, hard working adults and an array of bright shining faces. Students who laugh and smile in many languages captivate visitors. The atmosphere is respectful, warm and friendly. As one child put it, "We treat them as they treat us."

Asa Messer has the ingredients to meet the high standards of Rhode Island schools -- capable students, caring faculty, supportive administration and concerned families.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

Sources of Evidence

- 1998 *Information Works!* (1997 scores)
- 1998 State Assessment results
- Examination of student work
- School and classroom observations
- Conversations with students
- Meeting with SALT Self-Study Committee
- Meeting with School Improvement Team (SIT)
- Asa Messer School Improvement Plan (July 1998)
- 1998 Draft Self-Study

Conclusions

Asa Messer students love their school. They see themselves connected to and responsible for their school community. (School and classroom observations, conversations with students)

As noted in Asa Messer self-study, Asa Messer students show significant gaps in achievement in all areas as measured by the state assessments. (Draft self-study; 1998 state assessments)

While 35% of the students achieved the standard in math “skills,” no students met the standards in either “concepts” or “problem solving.” (1998 state assessments)

Current reporting of state assessment results does not provide sufficient data to identify equity gaps. (1998 state assessments)

Although the Asa Messer Self-Study notes an equity gap in math between ESL and non-ESL students, examination of student work and classroom observations were not conclusive on this point. (Classroom observation, Asa Messer Draft Self-study 1998, examination of student work)

Asa Messer Self-Study Team used state assessment data effectively to inform the 1998 Draft Self-Study. (1998 state assessments, 1998 Draft Self-Study)

Student work demonstrated higher student abilities than reflected in test scores. (Examination of student work, 1998 state assessment)

The SALT Visiting Team Commends Asa Messer School for:

- Staff commitment to SALT process
- Gap analysis in Draft of Self-Study
- Student pride in their school

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that Asa Messer School:

Use results from 1999 *Infoworks!* to continue your analysis of equity gaps and connect it to classroom practices.

Build on students’ pride in their school to accelerate learning and achievement.

Strengthen the School Improvement Plan by focusing directly on improving classroom practices to more actively involve students in the learning process.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, specialists, students and staff
- Parent meeting
- Student meeting
- SALT Self Study Committee Meeting
- School Improvement Team Meeting
- 1998 State Assessments
- SALT Survey Results
- Asa Messer School Improvement Plan
- Draft 1998 Self-Study
- Following students
- Ecoliteracy Curriculum

Conclusions

Asa Messer teachers' hard work and care for their students has resulted in a safe, supportive learning environment. (classroom and school observations, parent and student meetings)

Many classroom practices stress skills that do not close achievement gaps to standards. (classroom observations, examination of student work)

Asa Messer serves its ESL population effectively. (classroom observations, examination of student work, student and parent meetings)

Teachers recognize the need to develop performance based assessments and rubrics to assess student work to improve teaching. (School Improvement Plan, Draft 1998 Self-study)

Asa Messer faculty struggles with connecting multiple curriculum programs and initiatives (e.g., Ecoliteracy, OATS, State Standards, New Standards, Reading Recovery, CIRC, HBJ, Silver Burdett & Ginn, literacy) weakening the focus on the processes of learning. (classroom observation, teacher conversations)

The lack of writing activities across the curriculum, as required by OATS, results in low assessment scores. (classroom observations, examination of student work, 1998 State Assessments)

In light of the low student achievement in math, too little classroom time is spent on math, particularly in the areas of concepts and problem solving. (1998 State Assessments, classroom observation)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Asa Messer School for:

Teachers' hard work and care for their students

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Asa Messer School:

Use your positive environment to explore and implement varied strategies to challenge students to higher levels of learning and achievement.

Encourage greater use of classroom strategies that close learning gaps.

Improve math achievement by increasing time spent on problem solving and critical thinking skills.
Improve achievement by writing in all subject areas.

Increase opportunities for professional discussion.

Strengthen the productivity of the faculty discussion about curriculum and instruction by focusing on what is taught in the classroom and how it furthers student learning in terms of OATS.

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that Providence School District:

Continue to provide OATS training to Asa Messer.

Provide opportunities for teachers to observe classroom practices throughout the state.

5. FINDINGS ON SCHOOL AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Sources of Evidence

School and classroom observations

Meeting with district administrators

Meetings and conversations with administrators, school staff and faculty, and students

Meeting with parents

School Improvement Team Meeting

SIT minutes

Conclusions

Teachers and staff support each other in applying consistent discipline resulting in a comfortable and orderly school climate. (school and classroom observations, conversations with teachers, parents and students)

Teaching assistants are an underutilized resource school wide. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers, teaching assistants and school administrators)

Classroom instruction and school services are adversely affected by problems with busing. (school observations, parent meeting, student and teacher conversations)

Despite the concern of teachers and parents, effective transition to middle school has not been addressed. (conversations with teachers, parent and student meetings)

Special Education students would be better served with consistent following of procedures, better communication among staff and more appropriate programming for students with behavior issues. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers and administrators)

Asa Messer has adapted well to the limitations of the hundred seven year old buildings. (school observations, conversations with teachers and parents)

Asa Messer communicates well with and attempts to involve parents in supporting student learning. (parent meeting, conversations with staff)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Asa Messer School for:

Your warm welcoming school

Use of garden to support Ecoliteracy Curriculum

Homework policy supporting parental communication

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Asa Messer School:

Develop an effective plan for transition of students to middle schools.

Explore and implement different models of supporting students with special needs.

Keep current with federal regulations regarding IDEA.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Providence Public Schools:

Find ways to change the administrative structures to make it possible for teaching assistants to play a more productive role in the learning of students.

Require bus contractor to meet the busing needs of the school.

Provide information to Asa Messer in a timely manner about federal regulations regarding IDEA.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Commendations

Asa Messer's commitment to SALT process

Student pride in their school

Teachers' hard work and care for their students

Most Important Recommendations

Strengthen School Improvement Plan by focusing on improving classroom practices to more actively involve students in the learning process.

Use your positive environment to explore and implement varied strategies to challenge students to higher levels of learning and achievement.

Improve math achievement by increasing time spent on problem solving and critical thinking skills.

Improve achievement by writing in all subject areas.

Strengthen the productivity of the faculty discussion about classroom curriculum and instruction by focusing on what is taught in the classroom and how it furthers student learning in terms of OATS.

Final Advice to the School

The teachers and staff of Asa Messer school have worked hard to create a warm, friendly and welcoming place. It is now time to focus your energies toward developing active, challenging learning tasks.

Support your students as they reach for higher standards. Allow them to work collaboratively. Encourage independent study. Let them ask questions about their world. Celebrate their cultures. Hear their voices. Let their imaginations run.

As you engage in professional conversations, let your students engage in learning conversations. As you record your meetings and ideas, let your students write about their ideas and experiences. As you have opened your doors to us to look at your work with “fresh eyes,” open the doors of knowledge for children so they see their world with “fresh eyes.”

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF ASA MESSER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SALT SELF-STUDY COMMITTEE

Nancy Allen, Grade 3 & 4 ESL
Carrie Booker, Grade 3
Maria Bonilla, Parent
Regina Caruolo, Grade 1 ESL
Jeffrey Dustan, Parent
Roberta Eddy, Librarian
Cathy Jones, Grade 2
Nikki Karon, Grade 5
Denise Missry Milburn, Focus Teacher

Frank Piccirilli, Jr., Principal

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Carol Belair, Grade 4 Teacher,
Little Compton
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as SALT Fellow)
Chair of the Team

Faith Fogle, Education Specialist
Rhode Island Department of Education

Carol Hoppe, ESL Teacher
Baldwin Elementary, Pawtucket

Thomas Labonte, Principal
Wakefield Elementary, Wakefield

David McKenna, Parent
Greenwood School, Warwick

Lorraine O'Connors, Co-Chair Regional School Committee,
Foster/Glocester

Louise Pankiewicz-DiCarlo, Kindergarten and Diagnostic Prescriptive Education Teacher
State Street Elementary, Westerly

Sharron Wolfe, Grade 1 Teacher
Robertson School, Warwick

Dennis Zacharie, Grade 5 Teacher,
Cunningham School, Pawtucket

Thomas A. Wilson, Catalpa Ltd.,
Providence
Coach to the Team