

WILLIAM D'ABATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Providence, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

December 1998

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

William D'Abate Elementary School is in the Western Zone of the Providence Public School system, which is under the jurisdiction of the Providence School Committee.

Most (68%) of the schools' 447 students live in the school's geographic neighborhood in the Manton/Olneyville section of Providence. This neighborhood is most often characterized as being urban, and low-income with the problems that are usually associated with such neighborhoods of American cities. 130 students come to school on 2 buses from their homes that are more than a mile from the school. 79% of the students began and ended the school year at William D'Abate Elementary School last year, which is not an unusual annual retention figure for the school.

The District's definitions for race and ethnicity results in the following percentages for students in each of these groups: Spanish (64%), Black (17%), White (11%), Asian (7.7%) and American Indian (0%).

Many students come from single parent families. 98% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch and all students may and most do have breakfast at the school.

The school's building was built in 1958. It includes a cafeteria, which also serves as a large meeting room, a gym and a courtyard, which is used as an outdoor living science center. It is a well maintained and cared for facility.

A principal leads the school's staff – working closely with the Focus Teacher/ELLI Literacy Coordinator, who spends part time in a classroom. She also works with professional development and curriculum issues in conjunction with the principal and SALT committee. The faculty of 18 certified classroom teachers are joined by 12 Teacher Assistants, 1 Bilingual Teacher Assistant Building Aide, and full and part time personnel as follows:

(100%) Art Teacher, (100%) Librarian, (100% and 40%) Physical Education teachers, (100%) Special Education Resource Teacher, (100%) Nurse Teacher, (100%) Family School Support Team (FSST) Person, (40%) Bilingual (FSST), (50%) Reading Recovery Teacher, (60%) Music Teacher, (30%) Band Teacher, (20%) Strings Teacher, (40%) Psychologist, (30%) DPT, (30%) Social Worker, (80%) Speech Specialist, (20%) Bilingual Resource, (10%) Guidance Person, and (10%) Attendance Officer.

Two office personnel, four custodians, and six lunchroom staff support this staff. Additional adults include an Americorp parent, five City Year Workers and students from Swearer Center at Brown University and Johnson & Wales.

The Nature of this Report

The purpose of the visit to William D'Abate School from December 8, 1998 to December 11, 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.

William D'Abate Elementary School Plan for Excellence (School 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, 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 William D'Abate Elementary School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 82 hours of classroom observation. All classroom teachers were observed once and most more than once.
- many informal observations in and around the school
- following nine students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for almost a full day
- observing a meeting of the School Improvement Team
- meetings with the SALT Pilot Committee
- meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators
- *William D'Abate Elementary School Plan for Excellence* (School Improvement Plan)
- District and school policies, Providence School District test data, *Information Works!* Data book; Providence K-2 Assessment Results, SALT Survey Report, union contracts, LIFT, OATS and ELLI guides, G-Tech Report, minutes of parents and SIT meetings.
- 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 25 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.

The Team using consensus agreed to each conclusion, each commendation and each recommendation in this report.

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 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. William D'Abate 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

It's 8:15 am on Thursday morning. School has not yet officially begun. Enthusiastic music is playing in the background. On this final morning of our Visit the cafeteria echoes with the sound of the William D'Abate Elementary School band practicing Christmas music under the guidance of their band director. Tables are filling up with children eating their cereal and pop tarts with parents and younger siblings. School personnel begin to filter in slowly. The energy filled cafeteria is a focal point in the school.

Students, school staff, teachers and families make up the community of the William D'Abate Elementary School. Motivated by the encouragement and enthusiasm of teachers like the band director, students feel comfortable and secure as they go about a day filled with a variety of activities. A dedicated staff works hard to meet the challenging needs of learners from diverse backgrounds. In an atmosphere of mutual respect among students and teachers a variety of educational and community based activities take place. A highly energetic principal whose warmth and devotion permeates throughout the building oversees all school activities.

This unique setting addresses the educational needs of both children and parents while recognizing the primary needs of struggling families. William D'Abate Elementary School, a focal point in the lives of the children and their families provides a bridge to their futures, a bridge created with pride by all.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- 1998 *Information Works!* (1997 scores)
- 1997 and 1998 State Assessment results
- Examination of student work
- School and classroom observations
- Conversations with teachers
- Conversations with students
- Meeting with SALT Pilot Committee,
- Meeting with School Improvement Team (SIT)
- *William D'Abate Elementary School Plan for Excellence* (July 1998)
- Following students.

Conclusions

- Students are focused on learning. They are extraordinarily respectful and cooperative. (Following students, conversations with students)
- Large achievement gaps (students testing below standard) exist in all areas as measured by State Assessments, however the quality of student work exceeded expectations based on test results. (Examination of student work, classroom observations, 1997 and 1998 State Assessment results)
- The school is responding to assessment results to improve its performance, but is overwhelmed by data collections some of which are confusing, inappropriate and time consuming. (School Improvement Team Meeting, conversations with teachers, classroom observations)
- Current reporting of state assessment results does not provide sufficient data to identify equity gaps. Furthermore, equity gaps are not an obvious issue in the school. (1997 & 1998 state assessments, following a student, classroom observations)

The SALT Visiting Team commends William D'Abate Elementary School for:

Respectful student behavior.

Good student work habits focused on learning.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that William D'Abate Elementary School:

Unify and simplify methods of data collection and analysis to allow teachers more time for instruction as well as a clearer understanding of what the data means.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, specialists, students and staff
- Parent meeting
- Student meeting
- SALT Pilot Committee Meeting
- School Improvement Team Meeting
- SALT Survey Results
- 1998 School Improvement Plan
- Providence K-2 Reading Assessment Results
- Following students

Conclusions

- D'Abate teachers and staff model, praise, nurture, guide and encourage students, fostering a high level of social intelligence. This enables students to take risks in learning, work cooperatively and behave responsibly. (Classroom observations, conversations with teachers, following students)
- Writing workshop and writing across the curriculum have successfully resulted in children who embrace writing as a meaningful avenue to express their thoughts, feelings, responses and ideas. The use of rubrics by students to evaluate their writing has begun. (Classroom observations, examination of student work, SIT meeting)
- Although teachers give individual feedback to students, lessons and follow-up activities do not accommodate varying language proficiencies and/or ability levels within classes. This creates frustration, "tuning-out" and lessening of meaningful participation. (Classroom observations, following students, examination of student work)
- Teaching tends to be dictated by programs. This decreases teachers' ability to make instructional choices based on professional judgment and limits their effectiveness. (Classroom observations, conversations with teachers)
- Constant interruptions (late buses, student tardiness, phone calls to classrooms, special activities,

impromptu parent visits) negatively impact the continuity of learning and effectiveness of teaching. (Classroom observations, following students, parent meeting)

- Entering kindergarten students have not reached basic developmental milestones. Nevertheless, teaching is directed by a structured program that narrowly focuses on a limited set of skills, excluding fundamental areas such as oral language, motor skills and social-emotional development critical to achievement. (Classroom observations, conversations with teachers, Providence K-2 Reading Assessment)
- Teachers are discouraged from and reluctant to refer students for special education services. This results in teachers spending an inordinate amount of time on one to one remedial instruction at the expense of other students. (Conversations with teachers, classroom observations)

The SALT Visiting Team commends William D'Abate Elementary School for:

Teacher support and recognition of student social and emotional development.

Integration of writing across the curriculum.

Commitment and willingness to try new initiatives.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that William D'Abate Elementary School:

Sharpen focus on existing initiatives that will have greatest impact on student learning.

Minimize classroom interruptions.

Adapt existing programs to meet developmental needs of students.

Utilize methods of instruction that are less teacher centered.

Provide English language support to all language minority students.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Providence School District:

Ensure that bus contractors provide services that comply with school hours to meet the legitimate educational priorities of the school.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with district administrators
- Meetings and conversations with administrators, school staff and faculty
- Meeting with parents
- Following students
- School and District policy documents, union contracts
- School Improvement Team Meeting
- SALT Pilot Committee Meeting

Conclusions

- The school embraces its parents and involves its community through initiatives that include ESL, GED, housing, medical services, family center, Americorp. This results in parents being valued as partners in the education of their children and provides a uniquely positive network of support for students. (Meeting with parents, school observations, meetings and conversations with school staff)
- The warm, inviting and congenial atmosphere of the school has a positive effect on student learning. (School and classroom observation, following students, meeting with parents)
- Safety and security are compromised by lax enforcement of visitor procedures and kindergarten student dismissal practices. (School and classroom observations, following students, parent meeting)
- Itinerant programs essential to the well being of the school are conducted in inadequate places. The kindergarten split-classroom is isolated in an unacceptable setting for the two concurrent kindergarten classes making quality instruction difficult. (School and classroom observations, meeting with parents, conversations with teachers)
- Ongoing professional development, including required training, is stalemated by the lack of an adequate pool of substitutes to cover classes. In addition, this lack results in overcrowding when classes must be split and divided due to teacher absences. (SALT Pilot Committee meeting, meetings with school staff and district administrators)
- Minimal teacher participation in decision making regarding curriculum, standards and instructional strategies decreases their understanding and willingness to buy into new initiatives. (Meetings with school staff, conversations with teachers)

The SALT Visiting Team commends William D'Abate Elementary School for:

Positive atmosphere for all children.

Extraordinary support and involvement of parents.

Dynamic use of community resources.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that William D'Abate Elementary School:

Redesigns space in the school or relocate the kindergarten space.

Enforce visitor and dismissal procedures.

Increase opportunities for teachers to dialogue and participate in decision making.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Providence School District:

Revise policies and practices, including recruitment, to ensure sufficient numbers of substitute teachers.

Provide effective training for teacher assistants and parent volunteers.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Commendations

Integration of writing across the curriculum

Teacher support and recognition of student social and emotional development

Extraordinary support and involvement of parents

Most Important Recommendations

Sharpen focus on existing initiatives that will have greatest impact on student learning.

Provide English language support to all language minority students.

Minimize classroom interruptions.

Adapt existing programs to meet developmental needs of students.

Final Advice to the School

The SALT Visiting Team was privileged to have the opportunity to spend wonderful moments in time at the William D'Abate Elementary School.

As you receive this report, we encourage you to recognize and take pride in the wonderful things you have already accomplished and continue to do every day. Your creation of a safe, family centered learning community should be celebrated. Focus on your positive accomplishments as you begin to concentrate on those aspects of your school that this report identifies as areas for improvement.

Our visit and this report represent a small patch of the intricate quilt that is your William D'Abate Self Study. It is up to you to incorporate this piece into your community quilt.

Attempt to find student centered solutions to the outside obstacles that limit you. Realize, that on a daily basis, you provide students and families with the very best that you can offer. Remember to carefully and effectively implement initiatives in a manner most beneficial to your school community.

You are indeed mindful of and have embraced the words that are proudly displayed in your building; "William D'Abate School, like this rainbow patchwork quilt, is a blending of many beautiful children and of the people who help them to grow."

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF WILIAM D'ABATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SALT PILOT COMMITTEE

Lucille Furia, Principal
Raymond Allsworth, Grade 4 Teacher
Elizabeth Molho, Grade 2 Teacher

Susanna Parsons, Focus Teacher
Judith Smith, Grade 1 Teacher
Raul Gonzalez, Parent

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Patricia Ribeiro, Grade 1 Teacher,
West Warwick
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as SALT Fellow)
Chair of the Team

Barbara Werchadlo, Grade 1 Teacher,
Tiogue Elementary School, Coventry

Richard Finlaw, Principal,
Hope Valley Elementary School, Hopkinton

Kendra Anderson, Parent
Walley School, Bristol/Warren

Simon Hole, Grade 4 Teacher,
Narragansett School, Narragansett

Mary Zolli, Kindergarten Teacher,
William R. Dutemple School, Cranston

Pamela Ardizzone, ESL Coordinator/Teacher,
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Thomas A. Wilson, Catalpa Ltd.,
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Coach to the Team