

M. VIRGINIA CUNNINGHAM SCHOOL

Pawtucket, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

M. Virginia Cunningham School is one of ten elementary schools in the Pawtucket School Department. It was constructed in 1964 and has had two additions. A two-room addition was built in 1970 and another two-room addition was added in 1989. There are 25 classrooms serving students in grades K-5 in this two-story brick building, which shares a lot with the Slater Junior High School. ESL students are served in self-contained classrooms in grades 1-5. There is one inclusion room that serves a special needs class and a second grade class. The school also houses a Child Opportunity Zone (COZ) and shares a health center with Slater Junior High.

There is a student population of 546 students: 1% are American Indian, .3% Asian Pacific Islander, 36% Black, 27% White, and 36% Hispanic. Primarily a neighborhood school, a majority of the students are walkers with 1 bus serving the school. 95% of the 546 students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. There is a mobility rate of 28%.

There is one administrator leading the building with a professional staff of 42 members and nine non-teaching personnel. The Cunningham School is under the jurisdiction of the seven member elected Pawtucket School Committee.

Cunningham School has been a SALT Pilot School since 1996.

The Nature of this Report

School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) is Rhode Island's comprehensive school accountability system. SALT is based on using information to improve learning and teaching so that the learning of all students in the state dramatically improves. The SALT Visit and other major SALT components are designed to aid schools in developing and implementing effective School Improvement Plans.

The purpose of the visit to Cunningham School from January 26 to January 29, 1999 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 Community.

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.

Cunningham School's Improvement Plan (created in May, 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 the Visiting Team is about how the students and staff 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 Cunningham Elementary School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 111 hours of classroom observation. Every classroom teacher was observed at least once.
- many informal observations in and around the school
- following 10 students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- meeting with the SALT Self-Study Team
- observing MDT meeting
- meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators
- *M. Virginia Cunningham School Improvement Plan*
- district and school policies, Pawtucket School Department test data, *Information Works!*, SALT Survey Report, union contracts
- a selection of student work collected by the Team

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 22 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 by 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 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 clouded by 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 Pawtucket School Department, the citizens of Pawtucket 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. Cunningham Elementary School has served since 1996 as a SALT pilot school and the school, its School Improvement Team and the Pawtucket 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

Cunningham School, affectionately called “diamond in the rough” by parents, teachers, and friends, is a school where teachers nurture, children sparkle and learning takes place.

Although students bring many social and emotional issues with them on a daily basis, Cunningham School provides its diverse students with a secure, family-like atmosphere, despite safety issues, physical plant limitations and curriculum demands.

While there is good teaching going on in the school, ineffective teaching practices are still being used. Student scores on tests are significantly better than for similar students in the state, yet overall, students are performing far below the standards. School improvement is hindered by the lack of district support and by the inability of the school to implement effective educational decisions.

The school's respect, trust and support for everyone is the cement necessary for the foundation on which to build the education of these children.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- 1998 *Information Works!* (1997 scores)
- 1998 State Assessment results
- Examination of student work
- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with SALT Self-Study Team
- *M. Virginia Cunningham School Improvement Plan* (May, 1998)
- Following students
- Meeting with students

Conclusions

1. The enthusiasm, courtesy, cooperation and respect of the students for all members of the school community impressed the SALT Visiting Team throughout the visit. (following students, classroom observations, meeting with students)
2. Cunningham School scores on Rhode Island assessments show a wide gap between actual student performance and the standard. However, in 1997 Cunningham students significantly outperformed similar students statewide. (Information Works! 1998, 1998 assessment results)
3. Although the student population of the school represents a rich diversity of cultures, available state assessment results do not provide sufficient data to identify equity gaps. (Information Works! 1998, 1998 State assessment results)
4. The school used SALT survey data and set impressive targets but did not use state assessment data effectively in planning for improvement. (meeting with SALT Self-Study Team, School Improvement Plan)
5. The effective classroom assessment used in some classrooms was not consistent throughout the school. Rather than being a tool to improve teaching and learning, too often assessment was used for grading only. (classroom observation, examining student work, conversations with teachers)

The SALT Visiting Team commends M. Virginia Cunningham School for:

Students' respect and support for each other and for learning

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that M. Virginia Cunningham School:

1. Examine the 1998 scores on the New Standards English Language Arts assessment to try to determine why they indicate such a wide variance among and within classrooms.
2. Investigate disaggregated scores in *Information Works!* 1999 for any equity gaps.
3. Organize and seek guidance on interpreting test score data in ways that will inform the School Improvement Team in its planning.

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 Self-Study Team Meeting
- SALT Survey Results
- 1998 School Improvement Plan
- Following students
- Meeting with district administrator
- Meeting with school administrator

Conclusions

1. Teachers are aware of standards-based instruction, but it is not being implemented consistently or effectively. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers, parents and students)
2. Instructional strategies do not always meet the individual learning needs of students in terms of learning styles and cultural diversity. (classroom observations, following students, meeting with parents and students)
3. The lack of literacy support services in grades 3, 4, 5 makes accommodating individual learning needs difficult. (conversations with teachers, following students, classroom observations)
4. Responding to very low test scores in math problem solving, the Pawtucket School Department adopted the Mimosa math program. Effective use varies from class to class as teachers are still receiving training and materials and books are being shared. (classroom observations, meeting with district administrator, and conversations with teachers)
5. Computers and calculators are widely available and effectively used to enhance teaching and learning. (classroom observations, examination of student work)
6. Although some teachers have made efforts to integrate ESL and Special Needs students, these students are not integrated with other students in art, music, library and physical education. (classroom observations, following students, conversation with teachers, meeting with school administrator)

The SALT Visiting Team commends M. Virginia Cunningham School for:

Use of computers and calculators for educational purposes by children in classrooms

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Generic School:

1. Participate in district training in standards-based instruction when provided.
2. Identify and utilize good models of effective teaching strategies.
3. Provide an in-class literacy specialist to work collaboratively with classroom teachers in grades 3,4 and 5.
4. Reschedule specialist classes so that ESL and Special Needs students are integrated.
5. Develop a better understanding of the individual learning styles of all students.
6. Use Schoolwide status to advocate for more financial resources to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Pawtucket School District:

1. Provide Cunningham with adequate support from local, Schoolwide and Article 31 monies to implement their school improvement plan.
2. Supply all materials required to effectively implement the Mimosa program.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with district administrator
- Meetings and conversations with school administrator, school staff and faculty
- Meeting with parents
- Following students
- School and District policy documents, union contracts
- SALT Self-Study Team Meeting

Conclusions

1. Children at Cunningham School benefit from the nurture and support of the entire staff. (following a student, classroom and school observations)
2. Significant safety issues result from insufficient supervision and the lack of management during lunch periods and dismissal; from storage of cafeteria equipment during physical education classes; and from poor traffic patterns on and around school property. (school observations,

conversations with teachers and staff, meeting with parents and students, meetings with school and district administrators)

3. The COZ is a valuable resource that supports the school, its families and community by providing useful programs for parents, after-school activities for students and health services for children. (school observation, conversations with staff)
4. Cunningham's administrator, staff and faculty work respectfully and effectively with the diversity of their students. However, despite good efforts, not all communications reach all families successfully. (meeting with parents, school and classroom observations)
5. The lack of empowerment of the School Improvement Team (SIT) hinders the school's ability to improve student learning and performance. (conversations with teachers, meeting with SALT Self-Study Team)
6. The school's inability to appropriate monies targeted for the school [Schoolwide (federal), Article 31 (state)] impedes the effectiveness of the school to provide effective teaching and learning. (meetings with district and school administrator)
7. Teachers have adapted to restrictions from limited space. However, not all areas provide a good learning environment. (school observations, conversations with teachers)
8. The teacher evaluation process is outdated and neither promotes professional growth of teachers nor encourages effective teaching and learning. (review of document, conversation with school administrator)

The SALT Visiting Team commends M. Virginia Cunningham School for:

Creating a trusting, caring and respectful school family

Down-to-earth, visible leadership by the principal

COZ and Health Center

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that M. Virginia Cunningham School:

1. Empower SIT to act on safety issues that are being addressed by its action team.
2. Continue to develop communication strategies to reach all families.
3. Lobby for full time nurse, social-worker/counselor, and reading teacher to support literacy in grades 3—5.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Pawtucket Public Schools:

1. Target Cunningham School to receive its equitable share of federal Schoolwide money to provide increased educational opportunities recognizing that 95% of its students live in poverty and are disadvantaged.
2. Increase decision-making authority at the school.
3. Work with Pawtucket Teacher Alliance to develop effective teacher evaluation and to provide daily planning time for elementary teachers.
4. Recruit staff members who reflect the rich cultural diversity of the school's student body.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Commendations

Students' respect and support for each other and for learning

Creating a trusting, caring and respectful school family

COZ and Health Center

Most Important Recommendations

1. Participate in district training in standards based instruction when provided.
2. Empower SIT to act on safety issues that are being addressed by its action team.
3. Examine the 1998 scores on the New Standards English Language Arts assessment to try to determine why they indicate such a wide variance among and within classrooms.
4. Lobby for full time nurse, social-worker/counselor, and reading teacher to support literacy in grades 3—5.
5. Develop a better understanding of the individual learning styles of all students.

Final Advice to the School

You have begun the difficult work of school reform. The Visiting Team suggests that your School Improvement Team (SIT) take the lead in this effort, but first you must be sure your SIT is representative of your school community. Encourage participation by scheduling regular meetings at varying times and by informing the school community of your actions. Once your SIT is established, committed, and functioning well, recognize the importance of its work and expect that the work will be recognized and supported by teachers, administrators, and the district.

Cunningham School must become a safe place for your children. Work together to solve the problems in your cafeteria, on the playground, and at dismissal.

In order to improve your test scores, implement standards-based instruction. Take risks in your classrooms by opening your doors to each other and to new ideas and strategies. Examine and share your students' work and use it to determine what you do in your classrooms. Take advantage of professional development and resources offered to you.

Develop an understanding of funding issues and open lines of communication with the Pawtucket School Department. Be sure the children of Cunningham receive the services and monies due them.

Your work to involve the community in the school has been commendable. Continue to work on opening lines of communication with non-English speaking families.

All of us have been impressed by the quality of your relationships with your students. Continue to provide this warmth and care to them. Cunningham School is truly a "diamond in the rough".

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF CUNNINGHAM SALT SELF-STUDY COMMITTEE

Richard Cooney, Principal
Philip Banigan, Grade 3 Teacher
Heather Fournier, Grade 2 ESL Teacher
Deborah Harrold, Grade 4 Teacher
Rebecca Mulligan, Grade 2 Teacher
Dennis Zacharie, Grade 5 Teacher

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

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

Carol Belair, Grade 4 Teacher,
Wilbur and McMahon School, Little Compton
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as SALT Fellow)

Doreen Bethea, Parent, District Advisory Council
Providence School District

Eileen Biancuzzo, Principal,
Reservoir Avenue Elementary School, Providence

Regina Caruolo, Grade 1 ESL Teacher,
Asa Messer School, Providence

Mary Carvalho, K-5 Reading Specialist,
Garvin Memorial Elementary School, Cumberland

Zawadi Hawkins, Education Specialist
Office of School Improvement, Rhode Island Department of Education

Suzanne Macfarlan, Grade 4 Teacher
Dutemple Elementary School, Cranston

Cheryl Niquette, Grade 5 Teacher
William Winsor School, Smithfield

Joyce Picard, Grade 4 Teacher
Citizens' Memorial Elementary School, Woonsocket

Tom Wilson,
Catalpa Ltd., Providence
Coach to the Team