

VARTAN GREGORIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AT FOX POINT

Providence, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

February 1999

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

Vartan Gregorian Elementary School at Fox Point was built in 1954. Originally called the Fox Point Elementary School, it was renamed for Dr. Vartan Gregorian, the former president of Brown University, in October 1997. Dr. Gregorian's generosity continues to support the school today.

Vartan Gregorian School's friendly physical layout is especially accessible to the physically challenged. The classrooms surround a courtyard where trees and plants grow protected. Approximately 400 children from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds with varying educational, social, and physical needs attend. Thirty five percent of the students are Latino, 31% Black, 23% white, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. There are about 52 students in Special Education classrooms, and an additional 22 students receive Special Education resource.

Vartan Gregorian School is not a neighborhood school. Only 27% walk to school while 73% are bussed. Seventy-six percent of the students receive free or reduced lunches. Fifty-three percent of the children speak a language other than English in their homes.

There are 20 homeroom teachers (including six special education and six ESL teachers) in the staff of 77. Fifty-five of the staff members are white, 14 black, five Native American, and three Hispanic. (Source for Demographic Information: Vartan Gregorian Site Based Management Application, June 1998)

In 1994, Vartan Gregorian School created a School Improvement Team comprised of the school administrator, teachers, parents, and community members. In June 1998 the Providence School Department formally awarded the school the designation of a site based managed school. The School Improvement Team meets every other Friday to make decisions based on consensus on teaching and learning.

Vartan Gregorian uses the OATS *Framework for Teaching and Learning in the Providence Public Schools*. Teachers use Core Knowledge to make content coherent and have been trained to produce Core Knowledge Units. A focus teacher meets weekly within grades to discuss Core Knowledge units, strategies, and materials. The focus teacher also coordinates staff development. Eight teachers and the principal have been trained in the Early Literacy Learning Initiatives (ELLI). Additional training is planned for grade 3-5 teachers. A transition teacher works with children who achieved just below standard while a Multiple Intelligences (MI) teacher targets the children who score on standard and above.

Vartan Gregorian School has a principal partnership with the Brown University Athletic Department. The athletic teams adopt individual classrooms. The athletic department also procured a grant that will build a playground for the children. The Brown University Eye-to-Eye Program that matches learning disabled Brown University students with learning disabled Vartan Gregorian students has gained national attention. The RISD Greenlinks Program provides an art forum for the fourth grades. The children entertain the elderly at Tockwotton Nursing Home and the Fox Point Manor. The All Children's Theater, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and the local library provide activities for the children.

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 their ongoing development and implementation of effective School Improvement Plans.

The purpose of the visit to Vartan Gregorian School from February 2 to February 5, 1999 was to draw conclusions about the School in the three focus areas of SALT:

- Student Learning, Progress and Achievement
- Teaching and Learning
- The School as a Teaching and Learning Community/Organization

The design of the SALT Visit ensures 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 is built upon the observations and conclusions of the Visiting Team. The Visiting Team is composed of Rhode Island school practitioners and a parent. Their affiliations are included in Appendix A.

Vartan Gregorian School's Improvement Plan 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, 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 Vartan Gregorian Elementary School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 90 hours of classroom observation. Every classroom was visited at least once. Many teachers were observed more than once.
- many informal observations in and around the school
- following eight students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- observing a meeting of the School Improvement Team
- meetings with the SALT Network Team
- meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators
- Vartan Gregorian School's Improvement Plan
- District and school policies; Providence School District test data; 1998 *Information Works!* Data book; SALT Survey Report; union contracts
- Early Literacy Learning Initiative (ELLI)
- Outcome Assessment Teaching Strategies (OATS)
- analysis of student work including a selection of work collected by the school
- analysis of the school's performance on state assessments of standards

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, with teachers, and in meetings with students, parents, and school and district administrators. 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 Vartan Gregorian School responds 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. Vartan Gregorian 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

Vartan Gregorian Elementary School invites its students, parents, staff, and visitors to enter its well-maintained facility and join its friendly, welcoming family. Each morning students join in the National Anthem and Pledge of Allegiance. Then in unison they pledge to remain drug free. The principal reminds the children that the adults in the school care for them and will not ever give up on them. If they give respect, they will earn respect. Students throughout their day behave in an orderly fashion,

supported by this climate of respect.

Here we find caring professionals, truly committed to the education of their students as shown by their willingness to continue their professional development, to reflect on daily practice and to plan for better education. In its journey toward meeting its goal of becoming a superior academic school, the teaching community faces a number of ongoing challenges to meet the needs of all of its children.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

Sources of Evidence

- 1998 *Information Works!* (1997 scores)
- 1998 State Assessment results
- SALT Survey data
- Examination of student work
- Classroom and school observations
- Meeting of the School Improvement Team (SIT)
- Vartan Gregorian School Improvement Plan (July 1998)
- Grade level writing rubrics

Conclusions

As recognized in Vartan Gregorian School's Improvement Plan, there is a significant gap to standards in mathematics and language arts as measured by State assessments. (*Information Works!*, 1998 State Assessment results, Vartan Gregorian School Improvement Plan)

Through its analysis and interpretation of data, Vartan Gregorian has effectively responded to State Assessment and SALT survey data by developing plans for improving student performance. (SALT Survey data, 1998 State Assessments, School Improvement Plan)

While the school shows major concern for the effect of ESL, Special Education and student mobility on student performance, the school has not examined performance data on these dimensions. (Vartan Gregorian School Improvement Plan, meeting of SIT, 1998 *Information Works!*, 1998 State Assessment results)

There is insufficient data to determine equity gaps in student performance on State Assessments at this time. (1998 *Information Works!*, 1998 State Assessment results)

The established grade level writing rubrics that inform instruction and promote learning have resulted in improved writing this year. Similar effective assessment that would inform instruction was not evident in math. (grade level writing rubrics, examination of student work, classroom observation)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Vartan Gregorian School for:

Efforts to connect data to teaching and learning

Well developed School Improvement Plan

Improvement of student writing

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Vartan Gregorian School:

Establish and implement effective math assessment.

Examine state assessment scores to determine the effects of mobility, ESL and Special Education.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Providence School Department and RIDE:

Develop a method to monitor the effect of student mobility on scores.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, specialists, students and staff
- Student meeting
- School Improvement Team Meeting
- 1998 state assessment results
- Following students
- Early Literacy Learning Initiative (ELLI)
- Outcome Assessment Teaching Strategies (OATS)

Conclusions

Teachers use the literacy knowledge, skills and strategies acquired through professional development to improve the teaching and learning of writing. (examination of student work, classroom observation, conversations with teachers)

The lack of effective math assessment and instruction results in low math scores; however, there are attempts to incorporate problem solving into math instruction. (classroom observation, examination of student work, 1998 state assessment results)

Note: Conclusion on new math program proposal is included in the next Focus area.

Inconsistent with the principles of Early Literacy Learning Initiative (ELLI) and the Outcome Assessment Teaching Strategies (OATS) frameworks, opportunities for students to read books independently for enrichment or pleasure are too limited. (classroom observations, ELLI, OATS-English Language Arts)

Teachers recognize the diverse learning needs of their students and express concern and frustration in meeting those needs. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers)

Continuous interruptions from pullout programs are disruptive to learning, do not promote classroom continuity and focus on differences rather than similarities among children. (classroom observations, following students, SIT meeting)

Some teachers do not effectively use literacy aides to support student learning. (classroom observation, following a student)

The innovative science program successfully motivates students through hands-on learning. (student meeting, classroom observations)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Vartan Gregorian School for:

Successful implementation of a writing program

Support for an elementary science lab

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Vartan Gregorian School:

Incorporate more time for independent reading and daily read aloud in classes K-5.

Aggressively use a variety of research-based strategies and performance assessments to help students achieve the math standards.

Move forward on the plan to eliminate split-classes.

Reduce pullout support services by providing alternative in-class programs.

5. FINDINGS ON THE 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
- Meeting with parents
- Following students
- School Improvement Team Meeting
- SALT Network Team Meeting

Conclusions

The principal, focus teacher, School Improvement Team and SALT Network Team provide exceptional educational leadership and direction for school improvement. The teachers and staff support the school's effort with dedication, and hard work. (school observations, meeting with parents, conversations with students, teachers and staff)

The placement of ESL children in integrated split-grade classes is neither the most appropriate nor the most equitable mode for delivering instruction. (following students, classroom observation)

The SIT has written a grant application for funding to address the identified need to improve math instruction and assessment. The teachers demonstrate the ability to implement this ambitious plan if funded. (SIT meeting, classroom observations)

The classroom, designated as "BB," is littered with materials that are inappropriately stored, lacks electricity, and is in violation of safety codes deprives some students of appropriate education mandated

by their IEPs. (classroom observations, meeting with school administrator, conversations with staff)

Extensive after-school programs meet the needs of all students and involve the community. (SIT Meeting, conversation with principal, meetings with students and parents)

Vartan Gregorian School successfully seeks and effectively engages in a number of community partnerships that provide financial and human resources, ideas, opportunities and experiences to support teaching and learning. (school observations, SIT meeting)

Vartan Gregorian School's climate is orderly, safe and conducive to education for all its students. (school observations, conversations with students, meeting with parents)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Vartan Gregorian School for:

Exemplary leadership by Mary Brennan, school principal

Brown University partnership

Homework club developed in response to parent SALT survey data

Portal-to portal transportation for all students involved in after-school activities

Comfortable, welcoming, safe, orderly climate for all students

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Vartan Gregorian School:

Integrate the ESL children in more heterogeneous classroom settings to provide appropriate language models.

Provide appropriate support for ESL students who are classified as beginners.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Providence School Department:

Immediately correct the violations evident in room "BB."

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Commendations

Exemplary leadership by Mary Brennan, school principal

Efforts to connect data to teaching and learning

Well developed School Improvement Plan

Successful implementation of a writing program

Brown University partnership

Most Important Recommendations

Aggressively use a variety of research-based strategies and performance assessments to help students achieve the math standards.

Incorporate more time for independent reading and daily read aloud in classes K-5.

Integrate the ESL children in more heterogeneous classroom settings to provide appropriate language models.

Reduce pull-out support services by providing alternative in-class programs.

Provide appropriate support for ESL students who are classified as beginners.

Final Advice to the School

Vartan Gregorian School at Fox Point has met the challenge of school reform head on. The School Improvement Team has developed a School Improvement Plan that recognizes many of the needs we identify in this report. We urge you to continue on this journey toward becoming a superior academic school.

You have also recognized the need to improve the quality of math instruction and assessment. We applaud your efforts to secure funding to support an ambitious plan for improvement in this area. It is important, however, that you begin now to make changes in how math is conducted in your school. Use manipulatives, make connections to the real world, and employ performance assessment to inform and assess your children's work.

Let your students learn from each other. Use heterogeneous grouping when assigning children to classrooms. When you are unable to eliminate split classrooms, use multi-age techniques to meet the needs of the children.

Celebrate reading by putting real books in your children's hands. Give them the time to read the words and pictures independently. Read to them daily. Find ways to get books into their homes and lives.

The drama program and the after-school activities provide enriching experiences to the children and the community. Continue to develop and support this kind of enrichment.

You have worked many "small miracles" on your journey to becoming a superior academic school. Your destination may seem out of reach, but you are well on your way.

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF VARTAN GREGORIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SALT NETWORK TEAM

Eileen Afonso, ESL Teacher
Betty Alves, Kindergarten Teacher
Doreen Andrews, Parent
Mary Brennan, Principal
Patricia Donahue, Physical Education Teacher
Marilyn Dorsey, Transition Teacher
Connie Doyle, Focus Teacher
Maureen Kenner, Special Education Teacher
Emily Teixeira, Special Education, Resource Teacher
Donna Wosencroft, Teacher

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

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

Mrs. Joanne Florio, Grade 5 Teacher
Thornton Elementary School, Johnston

Mrs. Maria J. Mansella, ESL Teacher
Silver Spring Elementary School, East Providence

Marty Perry, Reading Recovery Teacher
John F. Kennedy Elementary School, Middletown

Mrs. Carolyn A. Rabidoux, Principal
Lonsdale Elementary School, Lincoln

Donna M. Sawyer, Grade 2 Teacher
Elizabeth Baldwin Elementary School, Pawtucket

Mr. Thomas W. Stott, Office of Special Needs,
Rhode Island Department of Education

Bruce Thompson, Parent,
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Coach to the Team