

NARRAGANSETT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Narragansett, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

May 1999

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

Narragansett Elementary School is centrally located in a residential area of a suburban community with a population of 19,000. It is the only elementary school in the Narragansett School District and is under the jurisdiction of the Narragansett School Committee. Tourism and commercial fishing are important industries in the town. There is a transient winter population that is unique to the town.

The school is a sprawling building that houses nearly 90 staff and serves about 750 students in grades Pre-K, Pre-1 and K-4. The principal is in her third year in that role. While the students represent a wide range of abilities, they are not diverse in terms of race (3% are minorities). Fifteen percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Thirteen percent of the students receive resource services, and five percent receive self-contained special education services.

Narragansett Elementary School became an elementary school when the town opened its first high school in 1975. In 1990, grades 4-6 left for a new building, the Pier School. In 1995, the fourth grade returned to the elementary school.

The school has been involved in reform efforts since the mid-80s. A staff developed Thinking Skills model received national attention. Narragansett Elementary School received the National School of Excellence award in 1986, and became one of the first elementary schools to join the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1989.

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 Narragansett Elementary School from May 25 to May 28, 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

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.

Narragansett Elementary School's self-study *How We're Doing* (1999) 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, 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 Narragansett Elementary School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 123 hours of classroom observation. Most classrooms were visited at least once. Many teachers were observed more than 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
- meetings with students, parents, principal and curriculum director, and the District Administrators
- Meetings with the Self-Study Team and the Program Leaders, CES (Coalition of Essential Schools) Meeting
- analysis of student work including a selection of work collected by the school
- analysis of the school's performance on state assessments of standards
- *How We're Doing* (1999), *Mathematics, English Language Arts, and Safe School Strategic Plan 1998-1999*
- District and school policies
- Narragansett School District test data
- *1998 Information Works!* Data book, *1999 Information Works!* Data Book
- Professional Development Activities
- Narragansett Elementary School's Examination of Student Work Folder
- SALT Survey Report

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 26 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 Narragansett Elementary 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 School Department, the citizens of Narragansett, and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility.

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 conclusions and concludes with the Team's final advice to the school.

It is important to read and consider this report as a whole. Recommendations and commendations should be considered in the context of the conclusions since that is the way they were written.

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

A mosaic of images is seen in the vibrant artwork and serene gardens that welcome students and visitors alike to the Narragansett Elementary School. Sandwiched between the community park and a residential neighborhood this sprawling red brick school is home for six hours a day to a hard working, overextended staff and an exceptionally friendly, bright, and articulate student body. While the physical size and the population of the building are not conducive to a sense of community, most of the staff seems to work towards that end.

The classrooms are inclusive and resource help supports early learners. Music, art, computer, physical education and health teachers work with classroom teachers on integrated units and activities. Children's artwork is showcased in school hallways. Students are given opportunities to perform for their families at convenient evening times.

Teachers speak with confidence about the high quality of their instruction, the caliber of their faculty, and the academic strengths of their students. They are, however, finding their way through the maze of professionalism and school reform, articulating concerns in many forums, and trying to find a focus while looking for answers to difficult questions.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

Sources of Evidence

- 1999 *Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- 1998 State Assessment results
- Conversations with teachers

Conclusions

Fourth grade performance on the English Language Arts New Standards Reference Exam was consistently good across the four subtests with students performing above similar students statewide. (1999 *Information Works!*)

Given the fourth grade performance on the English Language Arts New Standards Reference Exam and the perception by some of the staff that there is a lot of writing at Narragansett Elementary School, it is surprising that only 11 percent of third graders performed at the proficient level on the RI State Writing Test. (1999 *Information Works!*, conversations with teachers)

Although 67 percent of fourth graders achieved the standard in the Math Skills subtest of the Math New Standards Reference Exam, 61 percent did not achieve the standard in Math Concepts and 82 percent did not achieve the standard in problem solving. Narragansett Elementary School fourth graders, however, performed significantly better than similar students on the Math Concepts test. (1999 *Information Works!*)

The equity gap between special education students and general education students who met the standard extends to all four reported subtests of the New Standards Reference Exam. (1999 *Information Works!*)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Narragansett Elementary School for:

Fourth grade performance on the English Language Arts New Standards Reference Exam

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Narragansett Elementary School:

Continue work on analysis of test scores to push decision making about effective changes in teaching strategies

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, specialists, students and staff
- Student meeting
- 1998 state assessment results
- *How We're Doing* (1999)
- Professional Development Activities
- Narragansett Elementary School's Examination of Student Work Folder
- SALT Survey 1999
- Following students
- Meetings with Self-Study Team, School Administrators, District Administrators, Parents, and Program Leaders

Conclusions

The absence of an understanding of how standards based instruction and assessment supports teachers' autonomy deprives Narragansett Elementary School teachers of a valuable tool to unify their curriculum. (Meetings with Self-Study Team, School Administrators, Parents, and Program Leaders, classroom observations)

Expectations of both teachers and students about what constitutes good student work are unclear and limit the effectiveness of ongoing assessment of student work to inform instruction. (Classroom observations, examination of student work, conversations with students and teachers)

In a climate of literacy and high reading scores, the absence of a coordinated reading curriculum within and across grade levels results in fragmented and inconsistent instruction which does not offer challenging opportunities for all students. (Classroom observations, parent meeting, examination of student work, SALT Survey 1999)

While writing receives a good deal of attention, writing instruction varies greatly and lacks the high level of clarity, imagination, and rigor that is possible given the elements of effective writing instruction present in the school. (Professional Development Activities, examination of student work by Visiting team and by the school, conversations with teachers and students)

The lack of effective response to low math scores in most classroom practice and school wide planning is surprising. Math instruction lacks spark and rigor reflecting dated methodology and materials. (Classroom observations, *How We're Doing* 1999, conversations with teachers)

Use of resource, reading, math teachers, a behavioral specialist and teacher assistants is tailored and revised each year to meet the needs of children experiencing academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties and effectively supports their learning. (Classroom observations, following a student, meeting with district administrators)

Technology is thoughtfully integrated into classroom instruction and has added a dimension of excitement for both students and teachers. (Classroom observations, following a student, conversations with teachers)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Narragansett Elementary School for:

Sensitivity to special needs students

Integration of technology

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Narragansett Elementary School:

Resolve the issues surrounding standards so they become effective tools to unify the curriculum and to clarify the expectations regarding student work

Build a coherent approach to the instruction of writing

Adopt a comprehensive math program for grades K-4 that emphasizes national standards

Find a source to insure that the excellent 21st Century Plan to put computers in the classrooms continues

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Sources of Evidence

- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with district superintendent
- Meeting with self-study team
- *How We're Doing* (1999)
- *Mathematics, English Language Arts, and Safe School Strategic Plan 1998-1999*
- *Information Works 1999*

- Meetings and conversations with school administrators and teachers
- Meeting with parents
- Student meeting
- CES meeting
- Following students

Conclusions

The principal is an instructional leader who is knowledgeable about education reform, supports teacher initiatives, and is visible in classrooms and throughout the building. (School observations, following a student, meeting with parents and students, meeting with school administrators, conversations with teachers)

The acknowledged tensions resulting from administrative changes, the changing status of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the pressure of legislative mandates prevent the school from taking the steps necessary to achieve agreement on a number of critical educational issues. (How We're Doing, meetings with school administrators, meeting with self study team, CES meeting, conversations with teachers)

The faculty and staff of Narragansett Elementary School have successfully created a school where children are respected, trusted, and empowered to be responsible for their own behaviors. (Following a student, student meeting, parent meeting, school and classroom observations)

Teachers share professional knowledge and collaborate on classroom activities during and after school contributing to a lively professional climate. (Meeting with school administrators, conversations with teachers, school observations)

Parents feel welcome at the school, participate in school functions during and after school, and are able to get answers to questions from teachers and administrators. However, parents are not aware of opportunities for more involvement in school decision making. (Parent meeting, school observations)

The School Improvement Team is not representative of the school and its community contributing to its ineffectiveness as a school planning team. (Meeting with program leaders, parent meeting, *Mathematics, English Language Arts, and Safe School Strategic Plan 1998-1999*)

The school's analysis of state assessment results is not used effectively to form the Self-Study and School Strategic Plan. (*How We're Doing 1999*, meeting with self study team, *Mathematics, English Language Arts, and Safe School Strategic Plan 1998-1999, Information Works 1999*)

Generous opportunities for professional development exist and have been especially effective in technology. Teachers share professional development experiences. However, lack of focus and agreement on areas of common need decreases implementation and actual practice of new strategies. (Professional Development activities, conversations with teachers, classroom observation, meeting with

school administrators)

The teacher evaluation process is under review. (Meetings with school and district administrators, conversations with teachers)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Narragansett Elementary School for:

Respect and trust for students

Dedication and professionalism of staff

Collaboration of specialists and classroom teachers

Exemplary professional development for technology training

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Narragansett Elementary School:

Establish a representative School Improvement Team and empower it to become the central decision making group for the school

Work for clarification and agreement on critical education issues

Focus professional development to address areas of common needs

Use state assessment results and other available information to further develop a School Improvement Plan

Create additional opportunities for parents and community members to become informed contributors to the school

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Narragansett School District:

Work with the local teachers' union and principals to develop a teacher evaluation plan that will improve practice

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Narragansett Town Council

Insure that the school actually receives its Article 31 monies

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Conclusions

The faculty and staff of Narragansett Elementary School have successfully created a school where children are respected, trusted, and empowered to be responsible for their own behaviors.

The absence of an understanding of how standards based instruction and assessment supports teachers' autonomy deprives them of a valuable tool to unify their curriculum.

The acknowledged tensions resulting from administrative changes, the changing status of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the pressure of legislative mandates prevent the school from taking the steps necessary to achieve agreement on a number of critical educational issues.

The principal is an instructional leader who is knowledgeable about education reform, supports teacher initiatives, and is visible in classrooms and throughout the building.

The School Improvement Team is not representative of the school and its community contributing to its ineffectiveness as a school planning team

Final Advice to the School

As you journey into the new millennium, revisit the principles that guide you in the light of current information and rejuvenate the strength of conviction that has been the hallmark of the Narragansett Elementary School staff. Allow that strength to guide you through the school reforms that face you today.

Narragansett Elementary School teachers share professional ideas and experiences and engage regularly in professional conversation. Designate a vehicle - - Program Leaders, CES, School Improvement Team - - to clarify and promote leadership among you, move beyond the conversation, and focus your efforts on results in one or two areas. The development of a standards driven curriculum would help you to develop and sustain that focus.

Challenge the minds of all the children that enter the welcoming double doors of Narragansett Elementary School and continue to take pride in the development of a school where children are respected and trusted.

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF NARRAGANSETT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SELF-STUDY COMMITTEE

Cheryl Blumenbaum, Grade 3 Teacher
Janice DeFrances, Principal
Simon Hole, Grade 4 Teacher
Cindy McDermott, Curriculum Director
Letty Mills, Grade 4 Teacher
Jeannette Mulholland, Reading Specialist
Carolyn Skaggs, Grade 4 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

Michele Bilodeau, Grade 1/Literacy Coordinator Teacher
Vartan Gregorian School, Providence

Pat Carter, Art Specialist
Anna M. McCabe and William Winsor Schools, Smithfield

Keller DiLuglio, Parent
Chair, Jamestown School Special Education Local Advisory Committee
Jamestown

Betsey Hyman, McAuliffe Fellow in English Language Arts
Rhode Island Department of Education

Karen Lehrach, Acting Coordinator
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Brown University

Connie Letendre, Grade 5 Teacher/Gifted Coordinator
Dr. Halliwell School, North Smithfield

Betty Morgan, Librarian
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Marie Strumolo, Grades 1-3 Resource Teacher
Providence Street School, West Warwick

Constance Sullivan, Principal
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Catalpa Ltd.
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