

# NICHOLAS A. FERRI MIDDLE SCHOOL

Johnston, Rhode Island

## A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

October, 1999

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# **1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS**

## **A Profile of the School**

The building which houses the Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School opened in 1960 as a high school and was renamed the Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School in 1968 after the building of a new high school in Johnston. An addition in 1990, added more than one-third to the building's size, which now includes the district's administration offices.

Ferri's administration is made up of 1 principal and 1 acting assistant principal, both of whom were new to the building last year. In fact, for the 1998-99 school year, 3 different principals served this school along with the acting assistant principal. This fall (1999) the school hopes to appoint a permanent assistant principal. At the district level Johnston has seen several superintendents in recent years. The

building administration serves under the superintendent who is under the jurisdiction of the Johnston School Committee.

The 1999-2000 school year opened to the major restructuring of teams throughout the school to accommodate an increase in the student population. This was accomplished through the addition of 8 new teaching positions, the elimination of reading as a separate class, the elimination of team leaders, teacher schedule changes, and the elimination of 1 of the 2 common planning periods for teams. Of the 72 teachers in Ferri Middle School 19 are new to the school this year.

A significant change in the lunch schedule at Ferri means that lunches now begin at 10:05AM and end at 12:55PM daily. The assistant principal supervises the cafeteria for the entire period, while the principal shares the supervisory responsibilities for the two largest lunches each day. A teacher contract dispute (which has since been resolved) led to a work action in the opening weeks of school, causing further confusion throughout the school.

The schedule changes resulted in ten academic teams that serve the 849 students: 4 sixth grade teams of 3 teachers each, and 3 seventh and 3 eighth grade teams of 4 teachers each. 94% of the students are White, 3% are Black, 2% are Hispanic, and 1% are Asian. 15% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. 23% of the students receive special education services.

## **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 Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School from October 26-29, 1999, was to draw conclusions about the School in the three focus areas of SALT:

- Student Learning
- Teaching
- The School

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 has been built upon the observations and conclusions of the Visiting Team. The Visiting Team was composed of 9 Rhode Island school practitioners, a school committee member, a staff member of the Rhode Island Department of Education, and a staff member of the Annenberg Institute

for School Reform. Their affiliations are included in Appendix A of this Report.

Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School's School 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, 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 Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- 145 classes were observed. Of these, 126 were full classes. All teachers were visited at least once. Many teachers were observed more than once
- many informal observations in and around the school
- following 12 students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- meetings with students, parents, principal and assistant principal, the District Superintendent, and the Special Education Director for the district
- Conversations with teachers, school administrators, non-certified personnel, and students
- School Improvement Plan
- *SALT Visit Binder*
- meeting with the School Improvement Team
- examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school
- analysis of the school's performance on state assessments of standards
- District and school policies
- Union contract
- *1998 Information Works! Data book, 1999 Information Works! Data Book*
- Professional Development Activities
- 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 29 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 Nicholas A. Ferri Middle 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 Johnston, and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility.

Following the Team’s summary statement, entitled 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**

After over twenty years of a stable administration the predictable life of Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School was thrown into confusion by a parade of three different principals, the large turnover of faculty, the contract dispute, and the imposition of change within the last school year. The resulting confusion, frustration, and conflict have led to a lack of direction that threatens the Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School community.

The school’s mission statement is not universally embraced and has not been effective in building a cohesive school community. While teachers, the principal, and the superintendent all have their own plans for how this school should function, no one has sat down to communally share those ideas nor to discuss how to implement effective school change so that all Ferri Middle School students can become actively engaged in their learning. Students are lost in the shuffle.

This has brought Ferri Middle School to a crossroads. Its future as an exemplary middle school or as a mediocre middle level school rests with the decisions it makes now.

## 3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

### Sources of Evidence

- *1999 Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- 1999 and 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results
- *Johnston Annual Public Schools Report 1998-99*
- Conversations with teachers
- Examination of student work

### Conclusions

40% of eighth grade students did not meet the standard on the New Standards Reference Exam Mathematics Skills sub test and 58% did not meet the standard on the Reading: Basic Understanding sub test. Students scored dramatically lower on the Mathematics Concepts sub test (only 11% met or exceeded the standard) and the Mathematics Problem Solving sub test (only 7% met the standard) as well as the Reading: Analysis and Interpretation sub test (only 32% met the standard). In addition a large percentage of students show little evidence of achievement on mathematics concepts and problem solving sub tests (42% and 29% respectively). (*1999 Information Works!*)

Notably, 84% of the eighth grade students met or exceeded the standard on the Writing: Effectiveness sub test and 81% met or exceeded the standard on the Writing: Conventions sub test of the New Standards Reference Exam. (*1999 Information Works!*)

75% of the seventh grade students did not achieve the standard on the 1999 Rhode Island State Writing Assessment and didn't show any improvement over the students tested in 1998. (1999 and 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessments)

Equity gaps (differences of 15% or more between groups) between Special Education students and General Education students exist in all sub tests of the New Standards Reference Exam except the Mathematics Problem Solving sub test. There are also equity gaps between male and female students on the Reading: Analysis and Interpretation sub test. (*1999 Information Works!*)

The Johnston School District's annual report inaccurately reflects all of the New Standards Reference Exam scores and the Rhode Island Writing Assessment results, making it difficult for the Ferri Middle School community to address the serious deficiencies in student achievement. The district's report incorrectly includes the percentage of students who "scored near the standard" in its reporting of positive results, greatly inflating what students achieved. In fact, Ferri students scored significantly lower than similar students statewide on five out of seven sub tests of the New Standards Reference Exam.

(*Johnston Public Schools Annual Report 1998-99*, page 9, and *1999 Information Works!*).

## **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School:**

Analyze and utilize scores on tests and other assessments including the state assessments to guide instruction.

Develop and improve reading and writing skills across the curriculum.

Incorporate standards into the mathematics classroom to improve problem solving and understanding mathematical concepts.

## **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Johnston School District:**

Report state assessment results accurately.

# **4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING**

## **Sources of Evidence**

- Classroom observations
- Following a student
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, students and staff
- *1999 Information Works!* (1998 results)
- 1999 and 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results
- SALT Survey 1999
- Meetings with School Improvement Team, School Administrators, District Administrators, Students, and Parents

## **Conclusions**

Most teachers talk at students, pass out skills worksheets, and have students copy from a variety of sources such as the board, the textbook, and workbooks. This results in students doing mechanical and repetitive work. The participation of most students does not go beyond the recalling of facts. (Classroom observations, Following a student, Student meeting)

Most assessments used are textbook generated tests or short answer, multiple choice, true-false, and fill-in-the-blank tests. These are not helping students develop the necessary problem solving and analytical skills that they need. Also, these types of assessments do not allow the teacher to decide what to do next. (Classroom observations, Student meeting, Examination of student work)

Teachers lack a common understanding of what they should teach and what students should learn. This results in confusion and the fragmentation of curriculum among teams and across grades. (Conversations with teachers, Classroom observations, Review of curriculum documents)

Teachers do not understand how to use standards to engage and challenge each student, to establish high expectations, to determine mastery, and to define what students should know how to do. (Conversations with teachers, Examination of student work, Student meeting, Classroom observations)

Individual pockets of excellent teaching and learning exist at Ferri Middle School. These teachers show a high respect for student work and opinion. They engage students in learning by listening to and working with individual students. They design meaningful activities that require students to apply their learning. Students work hard and enjoy learning. This demonstrates that these students can learn and these teachers can teach. (Classroom observations, Conversations with students, Following a student, Examination of student work, Meetings with students and parents)

### **The SALT Visiting Team commends Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School for:**

Pockets of excellent teaching and learning

### **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School:**

Use varied teaching strategies that actively engage students in the learning process.

Develop and utilize assessment techniques that require higher order thinking skills.

Implement focused and ongoing professional development so that teachers can use standards to improve the curriculum and their teaching strategies.

Write a common core of curricula.

### **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Johnston School District:**

Provide the resources necessary to support the entire school's faculty in understanding and using

standards based instruction and assessment.

## 5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

### Sources of Evidence

- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with district superintendent
- Meeting with School Improvement Team
- *1999 Information Works!*
- Meetings and conversations with school administrators and teachers
- Meeting with parents
- Meeting with students
- Following a student

### Conclusions

The majority of the faculty perceives that the administration is not supportive and does not follow through on decisions and commitments made. This contributes to poor communication and faculty division and weakens the school's ability to educate its students. (Conversations with teachers, Meeting with principal)

The schedule for the day is not working. It promotes the ineffective use of time and fragments instructional time. The shortened and split periods take away from instructional time. Six lunch periods that begin at 10:05 and end at 12:55 (more than ½ the school day) also contribute to the problem. (Following a student, Review of SALT Visit Binder, Classroom observations)

The plan for improving education is not used and the roles and responsibilities for providing educational leadership are too broadly defined. Currently the administration has placed all of its responsibility for instructional issues and concerns on one person. (Conversations with teachers, School Improvement Team meeting, Review of Lead Teacher Job Description, Review of School Improvement Plan of April, 1998)

Teachers often teach in isolation rather than as members of an interdisciplinary team. One period of planning time is not sufficient for teams to coordinate their efforts. (Classroom observations, Conversations with teachers, Review of school schedules)

The School Improvement Team is not a meaningful part of the decision making process, limiting its positive impact on learning. (Meeting with School Improvement Team, Conversations with teachers, Meeting with principal)

## **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School:**

Rebuild communication and trust between administration and faculty.

Restructure the schedule to eliminate split periods and reduce the number of the lunch periods.

Increase the number of common planning periods per week.

Address the critical need for educational leadership throughout the school.

Use the SALT Guide Building a School Improvement Team to greatly strengthen the functioning of Ferri's School Improvement Team.

## **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Johnston School District:**

Create and support a stable administrative structure for Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School.

# **6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

## **Most Important Conclusions**

Most teachers talk at students, pass out skills worksheets, and have students copy from a variety of sources such as the board, the textbook, and workbooks. This results in students doing mechanical and repetitive work. The participation of most students does not go beyond the recalling of facts. (Classroom observations, Following a student, Student meeting)

Teachers lack a common understanding of what they should teach and what students should learn. This results in confusion and the fragmentation of curriculum among teams and across grades. (Conversations with teachers, Classroom observations, Review of curriculum documents)

Teachers do not understand how to use standards to engage and challenge each student, to establish high expectations, to determine mastery, and to define what students should know how to do. (Conversations with teachers, Examination of student work, Student meeting, Classroom observations)

The majority of the faculty perceives that the administration is not supportive and doesn't follow through on decisions and commitments made. This contributes to poor communication and faculty division and weakens the school's ability to educate its students. (Conversations with teachers, Meeting with principal)

The School Improvement Team is not a meaningful part of the decision making process, limiting its positive impact on learning. (Meeting with School Improvement Team, Conversations with teachers, Meeting with principal)

## **Final Advice to the School**

The SALT Visiting Team has worked particularly hard to develop a clear understanding of your school. We realize that most of the conclusions are difficult for you to hear, but you are now at a critical crossroads. Change is hard, but change you must. Talk to each other; mentor each other; and focus on your students. Come together around a shared, powerful vision for the learning of your students. We have seen what you can be in those “pockets of excellence”.

Read this report with care. Seriously consider our conclusions and use them to help you move Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School towards becoming the exemplary middle school it can be. Begin the work now.

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## **APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT**

### **MEMBERS OF NICHOLAS A. FERRI MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM**

#### **Marcia Cross, Instructional Leader**

Jean Knott, Teacher  
Stuart List, Teacher  
James McNaught, Assistant Principal  
Janice Mesolello, Reading Consultant  
Carol Pitassi, Teacher  
Judith, Spinelli, Teacher  
Andy Tackett, Principal  
Mary Ann Testa, Teacher  
Joyce Ung, Teacher  
Cindy Vanner, Parent

#### **MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM**

Sandra L. Olson, English/Language Arts Teacher, Team Leader  
Ponaganset Middle School, Foster-Glocester  
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as SALT Fellow)

Chair of the Team

Judy Brennan  
Gaudet Middle School (retired)

Cindy Grady, Health/Physical Education Teacher  
Western Hills Middle School, Cranston

Lou Jannetta, Assistant Principal  
Perry Middle School, Providence

Lorraine Keeney  
Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Providence

Norma Knight, Grade 6 Teacher  
Deering Middle School, West Warwick

Patricia Lytle, Math Teacher, Department Chair  
Winman Junior High School, Warwick

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

Emery Pineo, Science Teacher  
Barrington Middle School

Paula Rice, Special Needs/English Teacher  
Davies Career-Technical High School

Nancy Warren, Education Specialist  
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