

SOUTH KINGSTOWN HIGH SCHOOL

South Kingstown, 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

South Kingstown High School is the one high school serving grades 9-12 for the town of South Kingstown. South Kingstown is a suburban town with a population of approximately 29,500. The present town population must be reviewed in light of the growth in this town over the past twenty years. The 1980 census data listed the population as 20,414 students; in 1990, a population of 24,612 (a 20.6 percent increase) was noted. The present estimated population of 29,381 as of September, 1998 represents a population growth of over 19 percent in an 8 year period, as estimated by reviewing the number of building permits issued for new housing units.

A seven-member school committee whose members are elected to staggered four-year terms governs the South Kingstown Public School District. A town manager and a five-member town council govern the town.

To gain an understanding of the growing pains experienced by South Kingstown High School over the past five years, one needs to compare enrollment figures for October, 1995 and October, 1999. It will indicate a 23.6 percent increase, with a student population in 1995 of 1071, and the present population, five years later, of 1,324.

Of the students attending South Kingstown High School 89.7 percent are White, 4.6 percent Native American, 2.3 percent Asian / Pacific Islander, 2.2 percent Black, and 1.2 percent Hispanic. Thirteen percent of the students receive special education services, .3 percent receive self-contained services, 5.5 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 22 students receive assistance from the Student Support Center.

South Kingstown High School students are served by a professional staff of 4 administrators, 101 full and part-time faculty, 24 aides and support personnel, and 10 custodians.

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 South Kingstown High School from October 19, 1999 to October 22, 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 is built upon the observations and conclusions of the Visiting Team. The Visiting Team is composed of Rhode Island school practitioners, a Rhode Island Department of Education field service member, a university professor, and a parent. Their affiliations are included in Appendix A.

South Kingstown High 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, 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 South Kingstown High School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 142 full classroom observations and 25 partial classroom observations. Most classrooms were visited at least once. Many teachers were observed more than once
- many informal observations in and around the school
- following 13 students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- meetings with students, parents, building and district administrators, and the Diversity Task Force
- numerous conversations and interviews with staff, students, and administration
- School Improvement Plan
- meeting with the School Improvement Team
- examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school
- school-wide observations
- analysis of the school's performance on state assessments of standards
- district and school policies
- *1998 Information Works! Data book, 1999 Information Works! Data Book*
- professional development activities
- SALT Survey Report
- departmental curricula guides
- review of textbooks
- district strategic plan
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) 1991 Visiting Committee Report
- professional development activities

The full Team has built the conclusions, commendations and professional development activities New England Association of Schools and Colleges recommendations presented here through intense and thorough discussions. The Visiting Team met for a total of twenty-six 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 South Kingstown High 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 South Kingstown, 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

South Kingstown High School is a clean, inviting school that houses teachers and students who genuinely care about each other. Teachers are knowledgeable and have the best interests of students at heart. Students clearly like their school.

Under extraordinary pressure and internal conflict the school welcomed the Visiting Team and asked us for assistance. You are clearly a faculty eager to do better, with its students' best interests at heart.

A main problem facing this school is the need to move toward a standards-based curricula that sets the same high expectations for all students, regardless of their chosen career path. Teachers' understanding of standards-based curricula, strategies and techniques for differentiating instruction and the use of performance-based assessments vary greatly within and among departments. The remainder of this report is a summary of the conclusions found in the body of the report.

There are noticeable gaps in the educational services provided among students from different socioeconomic classes, ethnic groups, and the college bound. Although this problem was identified in the 1991 NEASC report, there is little evidence that this school community has made any substantive curricula changes that both the college bound and perceived non-college bound will need to function in today's society. The school has failed to realize that all students, regardless of their chosen career path, need to master rigorous academic curricula and to develop the ability to apply this knowledge to real-world problems.

Far too many teachers rely on instructional strategies, which focus on memorization, not understanding. A large portion of instructional time was spent preparing for the next quiz and/or reviewing homework. These instructional practices appear to have created an unspoken compact between many teachers and students about classroom expectations. This compact limits the students' responsibilities to a narrow portion of the curriculum, and prevents a deeper exploration of the entire subject. In addition, students can disengage from lessons and classroom activities provided they sit passively and do not cause a disruption.

Many of the professionals are frustrated and hindered in their efforts at instruction by the need for current resources, professional development, and a glaring lack of all types of technology. The absence of an identified, clearly articulated vision at the building level contributes to this sense of frustration.

The school and community have failed to recognize the changing demographics of the community and the more sophisticated levels of understanding that today's colleges and workplaces require. Many teachers are content that the strategies of the past will be effective in the future. New ideas, research, and challenges are not being fully explored or embraced by the faculty, school, district, or community.

There are disconnection, polarization, paralysis, and leadership issues at the faculty, departmental, school, and district level. South Kingstown High School has a great history of providing a good education for its students, but has the feel of a school that is slowly losing its edge.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

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

Conclusions

The average verbal and math scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, with a 90 percent participation rate, demonstrate strong performance. In addition, on the 1998 New Standards Reference Exam high proportions of South Kingstown High School tenth grade students (82 percent) achieved the standard for mathematics skills. Unfortunately, much lower proportions achieved the standards for Mathematics: Concepts (38 percent) and Mathematics: Problem Solving (28 percent) respectively. (*1999 Information Works!*)

An equity gap (a difference greater than or equal to 15 percent) exists between males and females on the 1997 and 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment. The female population scored higher on this assessment. (*1999 Information Works!*)

An equity gap (a difference greater than or equal to 15 percent) exists between special education and the general education population. The general population scored higher on the 1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment, the 1998 New Standards Reference Exam Math: Skills and Math: Problem Solving sub-tests, and the 1997 New Standards Reference Exam Math: Skills sub-test. (*1999 Information Works!*, *1998 Information Works!*)

The majority of the students are respectful to adults and their peers, cooperative, and proud of their school. (classroom observations, conversations with students and teachers, following students)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that South Kingstown High School:

Focus the school and its community on closing achievement and equity gaps.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, students and staff
- *1999 Information Works!*
- 1998 state assessment results
- SALT Survey 1999
- Following students
- Review of textbooks
- Review of Curricula
- Meetings with School Improvement Team, School Administrators, District Administrators, the Diversity Task Force, students, and Parents

Conclusions

Teachers at South Kingstown High School demonstrate a high degree of commitment, genuinely care for their students, and provide a respectful, safe environment. This creates a strong foundation for making the educational changes necessary for all students to reach high levels of achievement. (Classroom

observations, following students, and meetings with school administrators, district administrators, teachers, students and parents)

The predominant teaching method used at South Kingstown High School is lecture, review of homework, and preparation for quizzes. The competent use of this teacher-centered method by some teachers helps explain the strong performance on the skill-based portions of the 1998 Mathematics New Standards Reference Exam and the Scholastic Aptitude Test. (classroom observations, 1999 Information Works!, SALT Survey 1999, and meetings with teachers and students)

Some teachers at South Kingstown engage students in their own learning through the use of discussion, writing, debate, presentations, and long-term projects that require students to develop and demonstrate their proficiency using concepts, solving problems, and using other complex thinking skills. The limited use of these approaches is unfortunate and helps explain the poor performance on the concepts and problem solving sub-tests of the 1998 New Standards Reference Exam. (Classroom observations, SALT Survey 1999, meeting and conversations with students, 1999 Information Works! examination of student work)

South Kingstown High School teachers rely heavily on single response quizzes and tests to grade students. The lack of different assessment strategies limits the opportunities for students to demonstrate their higher order thinking skills. This provides poor feedback to both teachers and students about what students know, their depth of understanding, and their ability to apply their knowledge. In addition, the information from these assessments is seldom used to resequence the curriculum, or decide what material needs to be represented using different instructional strategies. (classroom observations, review of curricula, conversations with teachers and students)

The excessive use of class time to prepare for, administer and review quizzes and tests limits the amount of time available to explore material in-depth, pursue students' interests, and introduce new material. (classroom observations, meetings with students, conversations with teachers, examination of student work.)

The curricula guides for most departments do not reflect national standards within their disciplines; most are nearly a decade old, and some are even older. In some departments—math notably— these guides merely follow the chapter structure of textbooks. This has resulted in an excessive focus on the development of the simplistic skills found in South Kingstown's textbooks and the creation of a passive learning environment that does not challenge most students. (review of curricula guides, review of textbooks, classroom observations)

Students are generally allowed to determine their own level of participation in class. Too often students are allowed to work on unrelated tasks or not work at all during class and study hall. These low expectations do not challenge all students to perform at high levels. (classroom observations, meetings and conversations with students)

The SALT Visiting Team commends South Kingstown High School for:

The relationship between students and faculty

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that South Kingstown High School:

Teachers should begin implementing standards in their classrooms, now, regardless of district progress. Distribute immediately nationally recognized standards such as the New Standards High School Performance Standards to all teachers, staff and administrators. Initiate a discussion about how to use them to both improve student learning and direct professional development.

Vary instructional strategies in order to address the multiple learning styles, needs and abilities of the changing student population. Consider collaborative learning, relating instruction to students' own lives, student led discussions, independent and long-term projects, community-based learning, exhibitions and culminating events.

Create new and varied assessment tools such as those identified in the New Standards High School Performance Standards and other nationally recognized work that allow students to demonstrate higher order thinking skills. Use these tools to assess student progress and plan instruction.

Develop and implement new curriculum guides to reflect both national standards and state frameworks. Define standards in each area with accompanying grade level benchmarks.

Develop and implement an inclusive coordinated program of professional development that focuses on standards-based instruction and performance-based assessments. Begin this implementation now.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the South Kingstown School District:

Provide leadership and support to South Kingstown High School as the school develops and implements an inclusive, coordinated program of professional development that focuses on standards-based instruction and performance-based assessments.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with district and school administration
- Meeting with School Improvement Team
- *1999 Information Works!*
- Meetings and interviews with teachers
- Meeting with parents
- Meeting and interviews with students
- Following students
- School Improvement Plan
- District Strategic Plan
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) 1991 Visiting Committee Report
- Meeting with the Diversity Task Force

Conclusions

The extremely high administrative turnover at the building and district level has resulted in reactive, crisis-oriented administration rather than a proactive, strategic planning team of educational leaders. This is compounded by the lack of strong instructional leadership by department heads, the absence of teaching department heads in some areas, and the failure on the part of many teachers to recognize the need for changes in instructional practices. This has resulted in the current leadership crisis, the bickering among many competing factions, and is evident in the lack of follow-up on the Office of Civil Rights ruling. (classroom observations, meetings and interviews with district administrators, school administrators, teachers, the School Improvement Team, and the Diversity Task Force)

The present School Improvement Plan is not a driving force for meeting the educational and leadership issues the school faces. (School Improvement Plan, meetings and conversations with district administrators, school administrators, and teachers)

The glaring lack of technology limits instructional opportunities and hampers administrative functions. (School Improvement Plan, meetings and interviews with district administrators, school administrators, teachers, and students, district strategic plan)

The failure to understand, acknowledge, and address the needs of all segments of the school population—especially minority populations, special need students, and the perceived non-college bound students—continues to limit the learning and social opportunities for many students. (New England Association of Schools and Colleges 1991 Visiting Committee Report, following students, classroom observations, 1999 Information Works! meeting with the School Improvement Team, interviews with students, teachers, parents, administrators, meeting with the Diversity Task Force)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that South Kingstown High School:

Focus the school improvement plan on the three areas identified: professional development, standards-based curriculum and technology. Prioritize within each area and begin the work with a focus on all students.

Establish and use lines of communication among the entire school community.

Identify the technology needs—hardware, software and professional development—for South Kingstown High School, and create and implement a plan to meet them.

Clarify roles and responsibilities of the School Improvement Team, the principal, administration and department heads, so that the School Improvement Team can provide strong leadership.

Provide the principal, administration, department representatives and School Improvement Team with professional development to build their instructional leadership capacity.

Build functioning partnerships with the Diversity Task Force and community agencies to create an inclusive vision that will move the school community forward. Utilize this vision to refocus resources and to acquire funding that is available for under-served populations.

Make the necessary structural changes to ensure faculty from Special Education, Fine Arts, Technology Education, Media Services, and Family and Consumer Science have a faculty voice in all school decisions.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the South Kingstown School District:

Provide contractual incentives for school administrators to enable them to make long-term commitments to South Kingstown.

Include an action plan for technology in the district's strategic plan that supports South Kingstown High School.

Support the leadership at South Kingstown High School, including the School Improvement Team, the principal and administration and department heads.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Conclusions

The extremely high administrative turnover at the building and district level has resulted in reactive, crisis-oriented administration rather than a proactive, strategic planning team of educational leaders. This is compounded by the lack of strong instructional leadership by department heads, the absence of teaching department heads in some areas, and the failure on the part of many teachers to recognize the need for changes in instructional practices. This has resulted in the current leadership crisis, the bickering among many competing factions, and is evident in the lack of follow-up on the Office of Civil Rights ruling.

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The failure to understand, acknowledge, and address the needs of all segments of the school population—especially minority populations, special need students, and the perceived non-college bound students—continues to limit the learning and social opportunities for many students.

South Kingstown High School teachers rely heavily on single response quizzes and tests to grade students. The lack of different assessment strategies limits the opportunities for students to demonstrate their higher order thinking skills. This provides poor feedback to both teachers and students about what students know, their depth of understanding, and their ability to apply their knowledge. In addition, the information from these assessments is seldom used to resequence the curriculum, or decide what material needs to be represented using different instructional strategies.

Teachers at South Kingstown High School demonstrate a high degree of commitment, genuinely care for their students, and provide a respectful, safe environment. This provides a strong foundation for making the educational changes necessary for all students to reach high levels of achievement.

Final Advice to the School

The team was in unanimous agreement that the faculty and students at South Kingstown High School are committed to each other. After spending four days in your school we could not help but see the enormous potential your school has to meet and exceed the needs of all students. It is because of your passion and commitment that the team worked hard to offer clear and needed advice.

You have lots of wonderful things happening in your school that you need to expand and capitalize on.

You have the responsibility to work cohesively as a team with the goal of continuously improving to meet the changing needs of your students and society. You also have the right and the obligation to demand support from your building and district leadership, school committee, and community.

If South Kingstown High School fails to embrace this need for substantive changes you will lose your competitive edge. The strategies that served the school well in the past—although capable of producing high Scholastic Aptitude Test scores—are insufficient to prepare students for the rigors and complexity of today's society. There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity for South Kingstown High School to make the necessary changes. Given the right support, this school can be an outstanding public high school for all students in the South Kingstown Community.

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF SOUTH KINGSTOWN SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Maureen Cotter
James Findlay
Stephen Mueller
Caroline Mulhearn
Geraldyn Perry
Ella Whaley
Ellen Yoder

MEMBERS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

Ruby Wildes - Teacher
Jan Lamagna - Teacher
Esther Eberly - Teacher
John Harvey - Teacher
Margaret Della Bitta - Teacher
Rose Majeika - Guidance Director
Karen Johnson - Teacher
Donna Guglielmo - Administrative Assistant
Jerry Pesch - Co-Chair
Dika Little - Parent
Maureen Cotter - School Committee
Ellen Yoder - School Committee

Lori Horton - Parent
Abraham Varghese - Parent
Njoki Gitahi - Student
Susannah Colt - Student
Howard Lohr - Assistant Principal
Patricia Hines - Principal

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Dr. Michael S. Barnes, Technology Education / Department Chairperson
Ponaganset Middle/Senior High School, Foster-Glocester, Rhode Island
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Chair of the Team

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