

GORTON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Warwick, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

October, 1999

CONTENTS

- [1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS](#)
 - [A Profile of the School](#)
 - [The Nature of this Report](#)

- [2. PORTRAIT OF THE CONDITION OF YOUR SCHOOL AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT](#)

- [3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING](#)
 - [Sources of Evidence](#)
 - [Conclusions](#)
 - [The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Gorton Junior High School:](#)

- [4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING](#)
 - [Sources of Evidence](#)
 - [Conclusions](#)
 - [The SALT Visiting Team commends Gorton Junior High School for:](#)
 - [The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Gorton Junior High School:](#)

- [5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL](#)
 - [Sources of Evidence](#)
 - [Conclusions](#)
 - [The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Gorton Junior High School:](#)
 - [The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Warwick School District:](#)

 - [6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS](#)
 - [Most Important Conclusions](#)
 - [Final Advice to the School](#)

 - [APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT](#)
 - [MEMBERS OF GORTON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL SELF-STUDY TEAM](#)
 - [MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM](#)
-

1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

A Profile of the School

Gorton Junior High School is located in the city of Warwick. The building, originally designed in the Fall of 1940 to be a high school, didn't become Gorton Junior High School until 1955. It is one of three junior high schools serving students in grades 7 and 8 in this city. Warwick's population of approximately 80,000, makes the Warwick Public School District the second largest in Rhode Island. Six elementary schools serve as feeder schools to Gorton Junior High School.

This year 675 students attend Gorton. 97% of them are white with the remaining 3% made up of 2% Black and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander students. Of the total student population, 27% are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Most of Gorton's students are enrolled in regular education classes, but approximately 20% are enrolled in part or full-time special services classes: 3% in self-contained special education classes; 13% in resource special education services; and another 3½% in the Gorton Behavioral Adjustment Program. All students at Gorton are homogeneously grouped for their academic classes.

Led by a principal and an assistant principal the school is organized into departments with 8 department heads and 74 full and part-time teachers and support personnel. Ten of the staff are new to Gorton this year.

For the 1996-97 school year the Warwick School District budgeted \$30,000 in professional development money to Gorton to prepare teachers for the middle level transition. This year, within the departmental structure, a limited, interdisciplinary teaming experiment is being conducted by one group of teachers in the seventh grade and another in the eighth grade.

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 Gorton Junior High School from October 12-15, 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 was composed of Rhode Island school practitioners, a school committee member, and a parent. Their affiliations are included in the Appendix .

Gorton Junior 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 Gorton Junior High School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 95 classroom observations. Of those, 83 were observed for the full class period. Most teachers were observed at least once.
- many informal observations in and around the school
- following 9 students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- meetings with students, teachers, parents, building administrators and the district administrators
- conversations with students, building administrators, school staff, teachers, a school committee member, and parents
- School Improvement Plan
- 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
- *1998 Information Works! Data book, 1999 Information Works! Data Book*
- professional development expenditures
- SALT Survey Report
- district curricula

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 30 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 Gorton Junior 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

Warwick, 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

The students at Gorton Junior High School feel safe and have developed a sense of belonging to this community. Faculty and staff are dedicated and caring. It is frustrating that the hard work of the faculty does not translate into higher test results. Some teachers continue to work harder in the same methods while others are trying different ones. The turmoil that is created by these two approaches has resulted in a divisiveness that threatens to destroy the spirit of the faculty while its students just plod on.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- *1999 Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- Conversations with students and teachers
- Examination of student work
- Classroom observations

Conclusions

Even though most students are polite, respectful, and friendly, many exhibit little involvement in their classroom learning and are often not challenged. (Classroom observations, Conversations with students and teachers, Examination of student work)

There are substantial achievement gaps between Gorton eighth grade students' performance and the standards on both the Math and English/Language Arts 1998 New Standards Reference Exams. The percentage of eighth grade students **not** achieving the standard is 62% on Math Skills; 85% on Math Concepts; 89% on Math Problem Solving; 54% on Reading Basic Understanding; 69% on Reading

Analysis and Interpretation; 38% on Writing Conventions; and 34% on Writing Effectiveness. (*1999 Information Works!*)

When compared to **similar** students statewide, Gorton Junior High School students performed disturbingly lower on all 7 sub-tests of the New Standards Reference Exams. (*1999 Information Works!*)

A substantial equity gap (An equity gap is a difference greater than 15%) exists in the Math Skills sub-test between special education students and general education students. Other equity gaps exist between male and female students on both the ELA Reading Analysis and Interpretation sub-test and the ELA Writing Effectiveness sub-test. (*1999 Information Works!*)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Gorton Junior High School:

Examine test scores closely and develop explicit standards-based strategies that will raise student performance.

Concentrate on helping all students meet or exceed standards regardless of their placement.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work and teacher assessments
- Conversations with teachers and students
- *1999 Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- Following students
- Meetings with building administrators, district administrators, parents, and students
- Gorton Junior High School Mission Statement
- SALT Survey Report

Conclusions

The dedication of Gorton teachers to their students has created a cohesive and safe environment. (Meetings with parents, students, building administrators, and district administrators, Classroom observations, Following students, SALT Survey Report)

The collaborative, cooperative teaching between special education and regular education teachers is clearly displayed within transitional classrooms. (Classroom observations, Following students, Conversations with teachers, Meetings with building and district administrators)

The dominant pattern of instruction throughout the school is paper and pencil tasks, oral teacher directions, and then additional tasks to be completed in a group or alone, resulting in little interaction between student and teacher. This instructional pattern reduces student motivation to learn and is not sufficient to fulfill the stated mission of the school which is "...to enable them [children] to meet or exceed high standards, to prepare them to become independent, life-long learners, and to challenge them to achieve their personal bests." (Classroom observations, Following students, Gorton Junior High School Mission Statement, SALT Survey Report)

Many assignments are simplistic, non-challenging, and repetitive. These types of assignments do not give students the opportunity to develop their proficiency in concepts, problem solving, and applications of knowledge in all subject areas. This contributes to the very low student achievement in concepts and problem solving as evidenced by poor performance on state assessments. (Classroom observations, Examination of student work, Conversations and meetings with students, 1999 *Information Works!*)

Assessments predominantly used at Gorton include true/false, fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, and short answer tests. While these are legitimate ways to monitor student progress and measure the information that students can recall, they are not enough. They do not require students to demonstrate their depth of understanding nor to apply their knowledge to real life. In addition, these assessments are not used effectively to develop future lessons. (Classroom observations, Examination of student work, 1999 *Information Works!*, Conversations with students, Examination of teacher assessments)

Reading instruction at Gorton is minimal. Although the adoption of the Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) program is one step in the right direction, adherence to this program is sporadic. This policy and the other strategies used to teach reading in **all** classes are insufficient to raise the level of reading achievement. (Classroom observations, 1999 *Information Works!*, Meetings with building and district administrators, Conversations with teachers and students)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Gorton Junior High School for:

The commitment of teachers to their students

The collaboration between special education and regular education teachers

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Gorton Junior High School:

Promote an environment that supports meaningful interaction between students and teachers and capitalizes on the curiosity and creativity of students.

Implement a systematic, coordinated professional development program which focuses on how to align curricula to standards and builds the teaching strategies and assessments needed for a standards-based curricula.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Meetings with building and district administrators
- Meeting with School Improvement Team
- Conversations with teachers and building administrators
- Following students
- Review of school policy

Conclusions

The growing division among faculty around issues of reform negatively impacts teaching, learning, and the atmosphere of the school. (Conversations with teachers and building administrators, Meetings with district and building administrators)

Patterns of communication within the Gorton school community have led to the spread of misinformation and feelings of isolation and mistrust, which limits faculty input and feedback. (Meeting with SIT, Conversations with teachers and building administrators)

The School Improvement Team is not representative of the Gorton community. Although the two-year window of opportunity for engaging parents does not promote their long-term participation, it is the faculty that is poorly represented on the School Improvement Team. In addition to parents the SIT includes only the 2 administrators and 2 department heads from the school. This lack of faculty representation has contributed to the failure to adequately communicate and fully develop, adopt, and embrace the School Improvement Plan for improving student achievement. (Meeting of School Improvement Team, Conversations with teachers and building administrators)

The policy of stanine grouping (the placing of students in classrooms according to perceived ability) severely restricts the reaching of high standards for most students and contributes to the low expectations for student performance. (Classroom observations, Review of school policy, Following students, Meeting with district administrators)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Gorton Junior High School:

Reconcile the divisiveness within the faculty regarding school reform issues.

Reorganize the SIT so that it includes broader faculty representation. Consider the advice given in the SALT WORKS Guide, *Building a School Improvement Team*, to build an effective team to make Gorton a better place for learning and teaching.

Hold **all** students to the same high standards.

Explore and implement more effective methods of communication between and among faculty and administration.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Warwick School District:

Reconcile the issues hindering school reform at Gorton Junior High School.

Take a leadership role in the planning and implementation of a systemic professional development program, which focuses on standards-based education.

Provide varied resources in order for Gorton to implement its reform initiatives.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Conclusions

The dominant pattern of instruction throughout the school is paper and pencil tasks, oral teacher directions, and then additional tasks to be completed in a group or alone, resulting in little interaction between student and teacher. This instructional pattern reduces student motivation to learn and is not sufficient to fulfill the stated mission of the school which is, "...to enable them [children] to meet or exceed high standards, to prepare them to become independent, life-long learners, and to challenge them to achieve their personal bests." (Classroom observations, Following students, Gorton Junior High School Mission Statement, SALT Survey Report)

Many assignments are simplistic, non-challenging, and repetitive. These types of assignments do not give students the opportunity to develop their proficiency in concepts, problem solving, and applications of knowledge in all subject areas. This contributes to the very low student achievement in concepts and problem solving as evidenced by the poor performance on state assessments. (Classroom observations, Examination of student work, Conversations and meetings with students, 1999 *Information Works!*)

Assessments predominantly used at Gorton include true/false, fill-in the blanks, multiple choice, and

short answer tests. While these are legitimate ways to monitor student progress and measure the information that students can recall, they are not enough. They do not require students to demonstrate their depth of understanding nor to apply their knowledge to real life. In addition, these assessments are not used well to develop future lessons. (Classroom observations, Examination of student work, 1999 *Information Works!*, Conversations with students, Examination of teacher assessments)

The growing division among faculty around issues of reform negatively impacts teaching, learning, and the atmosphere of the school. (Conversations with teachers and building administrators, Meetings with district and building administrators)

The School Improvement Team is not representative of the Gorton community. Although the two-year window of opportunity for engaging parents does not promote their long-term participation, it is the faculty that is poorly represented on the School Improvement Team. In addition to parents the SIT includes only the 2 administrators and 2 department heads from the school. This lack of faculty representation has contributed to the failure to adequately communicate and fully develop, adopt, and embrace the School Improvement Plan for improving student achievement. (Meeting of School Improvement Team, Conversations with teachers and building administrators)

The policy of stanine grouping (the placing of students in classrooms according to perceived ability) severely restricts the reaching of high standards for most students and contributes to the low expectations for student performance. (Classroom observations, Review of school policy, Following students, Meeting with district administrators)

Final Advice to the School

The SALT Visiting Team recognizes that we have given you a formidable challenge in this report. You are a caring, dedicated staff and administration who have created a pleasant place in which to work and learn.

However, although the context in which schools have operated over the past 40 years has changed significantly, Gorton Junior High School has not. Teachers at Gorton have tightly held onto the practices of the departmentalized secondary school model. This organization of the school has contributed to feelings of isolation and limited the effectiveness of communication. Teaching strategies evident throughout the building, although effective in the past, no longer meet the needs of today's children. Instructional strategies need to be varied; visuals and manipulatives must be utilized; and classroom assignments need to include activities that require students to synthesize and analyze as well as present information. Teaching standards-based education requires the seamless integration of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

You must look within yourselves to initiate a meaningful change that will energize you, your students, and their parents. Under the leadership of your school improvement team and building administrators you must now take action which will allow teachers to energize lessons, students to become excited

about their learning, and all students to reach high standards.

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF GORTON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

Rickard Gannon, Principal
Paula Bailey, Assistant Principal
Bill Perkins, Guidance Department Head, SIT Chair
Tony Bastia, Special Education Department Head
Gwenn Carbone, Parent
Joanne Heffernan, Parent
Soonok Jeon, Parent
Donna Ryder, Parent

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Sandra L. Olson, E/LA 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

Matthew Banuchi
Parent

Dr. Michael S. Barnes
Ponaganset High School, Technology Department Chairperson
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as SALT Fellow)

Merry Caswell, Assistant Principal
Slater Junior High School, Pawtucket

Dennis Charpentier, Science Teacher and Team Leader
Western Hills Middle School, Cranston

Nancy Daley, Math-Science Teacher,
Deering Middle School, West Warwick

Denise F. McCarthy, English/Language Arts Teacher
Gaudet Middle School, Middletown

Diane V. Tresca, School Counselor
Gilbert Stuart Middle School, Providence

Ellen Yoder, School Committee Member
South Kingstown

Tom Wilson, Principal/Catalpa Ltd.
Coach to the Team