

# SHEA HIGH SCHOOL

Pawtucket, Rhode Island

## A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

November 1999

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

## A Profile of the School

Charles E. Shea Senior High School is one of two public high schools serving the students of Pawtucket. It is part of the Pawtucket School System, which operates under the governance of the Pawtucket School Committee—a seven person elected body. The school first opened its doors to students in September of 1940. The building of the school was part of a Public Works Administration project. Among its unusual features is the excellent use of Art Deco ornamentation. Recently, the school has renovated the auditorium, pool, bleachers, health center, window treatments, and three science labs—chemistry, biology, and physics.

In 1985, Shea became a four-year high school and presently has an enrollment of 963 students and 102 faculty and staff. Shea is home to all English as a Second Language (ESL) students as well as students from the western side of the city. The student body is 37 percent Black / African American, 33 percent White, 29 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Asian / Pacific Islander. Shea draws students from all over the world. The school services students from South America, North America, Central America, Asia,

Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Africa. A recent internal survey identified students from 47 different countries with proficiency in 31 languages.

The school is presently in its second year of 4x4 block scheduling which permits students to enroll in eight to fifteen classes per year, or four classes per day for an entire semester or quarter. Since switching to this new schedule the percentage of students making Shea's Honor Roll has increased from 22 percent to 34 percent. In addition, the school now offers a greater variety of courses to all students in career and college bound classes.

## **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 Shea High School from November 8, 1999 to November 12, 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 and a parent. Their affiliations are included in Appendix A.

Shea 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 Shea High School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 74 full classroom observations and 21 partial classroom observations, which totaled over 130 hours of time spent in direct 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 12 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
- conversations and interviews with many staff, students, and administration
- School Improvement Plan
- meeting with the School's Strategic Planning 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
- review of professional development activities
- SALT Survey Report
- departmental curricula maps
- review of textbooks
- district strategic plan
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) 1991 Visiting Committee 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 Shea 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 Pawtucket School Department, the citizens of Pawtucket, 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**

Upon entering Shea one is struck by the warmth and courtesy of both students and adults. The students and faculty of Shea High School were open and inviting to a group of outsiders visiting their school. Teachers and students were forthcoming in their appraisals of themselves and their school in an attempt to accommodate our visiting team. The faculty and administration have clearly worked hard to create an environment for their students that is safe, warm, and comfortable. The new science labs and auditorium, the cleanliness of the corridors, the bright decorations all reflect the pride shared by the school community.

Shea, like many schools, has difficulties. Sadly, adults at all levels seem more concerned with fixing the blame than fixing the problems. The lack of a clearly articulated vision for the school and the blurring of responsibilities between and among building and district level administrators are of concern. It is unclear who is making many of the building level decisions.

Many teachers in this school definitely show a genuine sense of caring for their students and believe they are working in the best interests of their students. However, their goals and expectations for their students are often too low. Students in many classes, especially college B and career classes, are given a disproportionate amount of dittos, films, while they docilely sit in class as passive learners. Students are not given responsibility, nor held accountable for their own learning. Too little is expected of them, and as a result, too little is shown.

There is not a focus on academic excellence at Shea High School. Sporting events and extra curricula activities appear to receive more focus and attention than raising student performance. No one appears to be leading this school on a path to academic success. There are clear pockets of excellence among the faculty at this school. Unfortunately, many of these people do not feel supported by the school and district in their efforts at change and reform.

The tendency to subjectively manipulate school policies, rather than consistently administer them, seems to be creating a system that holds neither students nor adults accountable for their actions. The administrative team is reactive rather than proactive and is not leading and supporting the faculty. This contributes to a growing pool of discontent and low morale. There is a palpable frustration within the faculty over what they perceive to be unsupported central office directives, an ineffectual voice in the running and operation of the school, and only a verbal commitment of the district to standards-based education.

Although this is clearly a faculty willing to change and take risks, they presently do not share a common vision. Furthermore, the faculty and staff do not feel empowered and supported in their daily struggles. Unless the faculty at Shea High School accepts its role in moving the school forward and clearly and decisively begins addressing these issues, it is in serious danger of losing the positive gains that resulted from the courageous move to block scheduling and the willingness to implement standards-based instruction.

### **3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING**

#### **Sources of Evidence**

- *1999 Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- *1998 Information Works!* (1997 scores)
- 1999 State Writing Assessment results
- Examination of student work
- Teacher interviews
- Student interviews
- Student work
- Classroom observations in all departments

#### **Conclusions**

Students passively pursue the classroom assignments given, but too often exhibit a lack of interest in and responsibility for their own education. (Classroom observations in all departments, student interviews, teachers interviews)

Students in many subjects, have not learned how to develop their proficiency in higher order thinking skills. This is clearly evident by the substantially low percentage of students meeting or exceeding standard on the New Standards Reference Exam Mathematics: Problem Solving subtest (3 percent), and the Mathematics: Concepts subtest (7 percent). (*1999 Information Works!*, observations in all

departments, student work)

The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the Rhode Island Writing Standard has increased by 11 percent; however, students, in many subjects, have not learned how to demonstrate their skills, knowledge, and higher order thinking through the process of writing. This is evident by the low student participation rate and the poor performance on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment—26 percent proficient (1999 State Writing Assessment results, observations in all departments, student work)

There is an equity gap (a difference greater than or equal to 15 percent) between general education and special education students on the Mathematics: Skills sub-test of 1998 New Standards Reference Exam (*1999 Information Works!*)

There is an equity gap (a difference greater than or equal to 15 percent) between general education and Limited English Proficiency students on the Mathematics: Skills sub-test of 1998 New Standards Reference Exam (*1999 Information Works!*)

### **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Shea High School:**

teach and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning

strengthen existing programs, and develop new programs and services designed to close the equity gaps between and among student groups.

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

assist the school in obtaining an analyzing disaggregated data about student performance

## **4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING**

### **Sources of Evidence**

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers, students and staff
- *1999 Information Works!*
- SALT Survey 1999
- School Improvement Plan
- Following students
- Review of curricula maps
- Meetings with School Improvement Team, school administrators, district administrators,

students, and parents

- Review of classroom assessments.

## Conclusions

Teachers are experienced, able, and concerned with the well being of the students and the effectiveness of their school. This leads to a willingness to move beyond their comfort zone and explore and adopt new approaches to education. (classroom observations, school improvement plan, conversations and interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administrators)

Although it is difficult to get students with a multitude of challenges to reach high standards, teachers, administrators, and the larger community are not encouraging all students, at all levels, to stretch and reach intellectually. It appears they do not believe that all students can master the same high standards. Moreover, teachers have shown they have the ability to help all students to reach high standards, but need the support, direction, and training necessary to achieve it. (examination of student work, classroom observations, state assessment scores, meetings with parents, students, administrators, and teachers, following a student, SALT Survey 1999)

The written and taught curricula are not aligned to standards. Many classroom activities focus on low-level skills that do not provide students with challenging tasks and projects designed to develop their problem solving abilities and communication skills. These skills are measured by the state assessments, but more importantly are needed by students to be successful now and in the future. (classroom observations, program of studies, interviews with teachers and students, examination of student work, review of curricula maps, School Improvement Plan)

The predominant methods of assessment used at Shea High School consist of single response true / false, multiple choice, and short answer assessments that mainly measure low level skills and memorized information. These assessments do not provide teachers and students with the knowledge and information they need to determine if progress toward standards is being achieved (examination of student work, classroom observations, review of assessments)

## The SALT Visiting Team commends Shea High School for:

the faculty's willingness to change on behalf of their students as evidenced by the move to block scheduling and participation in Course One.

the abundance of extra-curricula activities and the faculty and administration's willingness to support them.

## **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Shea High School:**

engage students with rigorous and challenging tasks that allow them to master the skills and knowledge measured by the state assessments.

continue to explore and adopt different approaches to instruction, such as cooperative learning and multiple intelligences to meet the diverse needs of your students.

create and implement a formal professional development plan that includes time and incentives, and that involves the School Improvement Team, building and district administrators, and the union,.

create and align the written and taught curricula to nationally recognized standards by offering professional development specifically designed to give the faculty and administration the tools they will need to provide standards-based instruction and use authentic assessments.

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

provide Shea High School with the resources, leadership, and coordination necessary to create and implement a formal professional development plan that includes time and incentives.

provide clear direction and support for the implementation of standards-based curricula.

# **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 newsletter
- Meeting with guidance
- School Improvement Plan

- District Strategic Plan

## Conclusions

It is unclear who is setting the direction and tone of the building. This ambiguous delineation of responsibilities by central and building level administration has created confusion, disorder, and frustration among the faculty and staff. Furthermore, the faculty has not unified behind teacher leaders to fully accept their obligation to move the school forward. As a result, Shea High School lacks the focus and direction to address the serious problems facing the students in this school. (School and classroom observations, interviews with teachers, meetings with building and central level administration, the School Improvement Planning Team, and students)

The inconsistent application of rules and the reluctance of administration to hold students responsible for inappropriate behaviors create an educational system that undermines the engagement and achievement of students, as well as undermines the authority of teachers. (Classroom observations, interviews with teachers, and meeting with the School Improvement Planning Team and administrators)

Ineffective school and community-wide communication impedes Shea High School's reform efforts. This communication system neither provides information about the school, nor invites participation into the decision-making process. (school newsletter, union contract, interviews with teachers, parents, guidance and students, meetings with administrators)

The disturbing overuse of quarter classes when a student is failing—by the school, parents, and students—removes the responsibility for learning from the student. This practice diminishes academic rigor and creates an internal mobility problem, which intensifies the school's external mobility problem, therefore making it difficult to plan an organized, sequential curriculum. (meetings with guidance, administrators and the School Improvement Planning Team, following a student, interviews with teachers)

The school community has failed to address the devastating impact non-attendance and late arrivals have on teaching and learning. Furthermore, the fact that the vice-principals have not worked collaboratively with the faculty to develop creative solutions to this problem is troubling. (meeting School Improvement Planning Team, interviews with teachers and administrators, classroom and school-wide observations)

The educational services provided to special education students are insufficient. The absence of a collaborative model for delivering services (inclusion) to these students, the uninspiring classroom environments, and low-level "life-skills" curriculum and instruction all contribute to the isolation and sub-standard performance of these students on school and state assessments. (classroom observations, interviews with teachers, interviews with building and central administrators)

## **The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Shea High School:**

administrators, under the direction of the building principal, assume a strong leadership role in curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve the performance of all students.

under the guidance and direction of the principal and the School Improvement Team, create a professional development committee that coordinates and oversees a professional development plan.

inform parents of the results of state assessments and involve them in the development and implementation of strategies to improve student performance.

faculty and administration work collaboratively to design and implement creative solutions to the attendance, tardy, and discipline problems facing this school.

create solutions, other than changing to quarter classes, for students who are having difficulty or failing courses.

create a functioning School Improvement Team, with sub-committees that encompass a cross section of the school and community to develop, communicate, and implement a common vision designed to address the concerns outlined in this report and Shea's current School Improvement Plan.

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

provide Shea High School with the means and opportunity to make school-based decisions regarding the scheduling and operation of the school.

provide the guidance and resources necessary to implement directives and district policies.

support the school in its attempts to respond to the recommendations in this report.

## **6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **Most Important Conclusions**

It is unclear who is setting the direction and tone of the building. This ambiguous delineation of responsibilities by central and building level administration has created confusion, disorder, and frustration among the faculty and staff. Furthermore, the faculty has not unified behind teacher leaders to fully accept their obligation to move the school forward. As a result, Shea High School lacks the focus and direction to address the serious problems facing the students in this school.

The written and taught curricula are not aligned to standards. Many classroom activities focus on low-level skills that do not provide students with challenging tasks and projects designed to develop their problem solving abilities and communication skills. These skills are measured by the state assessments, but more importantly are needed by students to be successful now and in the future.

Although it is difficult to get students with a multitude of challenges to reach high standards, teachers, administrators, and the larger community are not encouraging all students, at all levels, to stretch and reach intellectually. It appears they do not believe that all students can master the same high standards. Moreover, teachers have shown they have the ability to help all students to reach high standards, but need the support, direction, and training necessary to achieve it.

The school community has failed to address the devastating impact non-attendance and late arrivals have on teaching and learning. Furthermore, the fact that the vice-principals have not worked collaboratively with the faculty to develop creative solutions to this problem is troubling.

Teachers are experienced, able, and concerned with the well being of the students and the effectiveness of their school. This leads to a willingness to move beyond their comfort zone and explore and adopt new approaches to education.

## **Final Advice to the School**

Shea High School is populated by a hardworking and talented staff, faculty, and administration that have created a comfortable and safe learning environment for their students. The involvement and visibility of both teachers and administrators in extra-curricula activities, co-curricula activities, and student sporting events are substantive and create a positive learning environment at your school. However laudable these activities are, your school community needs to focus on the process of teaching and learning and improving the performance of all students, regardless of their chosen career path.

The adults at Shea high School need to build on your shared concern for the students of this school. You need to begin working together to solve the formidable problems facing the students that attend this school. This requires that communication be two-way, that teacher's suggestions for improving the school are given consideration, and that decisions, when made, are communicated back to the faculty and staff. It also means that teachers in this school need to rally around educational leaders within this building and work as a team of professionals all moving in the same direction.

As a team, we recognize the day to day struggle that your urban school faces, and the obvious commitment the adults in school have to their students. It is because of this commitment that the Visiting Team worked so hard to develop conclusions and recommendations for your school. However, it is not our hard work that counts, rather it is how you respond to this report. It is our hope that this

report provides a direction for your course of action.

To date, you have not fully recognized, nor utilized, the power of your collective voice. You clearly have the capacity to overcome the obstacles you face in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, leadership, teamwork, and communication. There are people within this building ready to become the leaders in this process. Look within yourselves, decide on a course of action, and settle for nothing less than the full support of your district and community as you recreate your school to prepare your students for the challenges they face now and in the future.

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

### **MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

Mr. J. William Busald  
Mr. Jon Anderson  
Mr. Paul Bettencourt  
Ms. Amy Breault  
Mr. David Chmielewski  
Ms. Lisa Savickas  
Mr. Raymond Spooner Jr.

### **MEMBERS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM**

Diane Andrade, Special Education Teacher  
Paula Bettencourt, Student  
Mike Cordeiro, Biology Teacher  
Tom Dubuque, Math Teacher  
Kathy Forrest, Foreign Language Department  
Linda Lemieux, English Teacher  
Beatriz Lopez, Student  
Sharon Oliveira, Foreign Language Department  
Arthur Plitt, Mediator, Parent Facilitator  
Jack Richer, Principal  
Lisa Savickas, Parent  
Ann Scherza, Family Consumer Science Teacher

Jane Stanford, Parent  
Marty Truchon, Math Teacher

## **MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM**

Dr. Michael S. Barnes, Technology Education / Department Chairperson  
Ponaganset Middle / Senior High School, Foster-Glocester, Rhode Island  
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as a SALT Fellow)  
Chair of the Team

Lisa Benedetti-Ramzi, English Teacher  
Coventry HS, Coventry, Rhode Island

Kirsten Canzone, Art Teacher  
Cranston High East, Cranston, Rhode Island

Margaret Della Bitta, Science Teacher  
South Kingstown, South Kingstown, Rhode Island

Karen Karten, ESL K12 Coordinator  
Woonsocket High School, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

Christine Fitzgerald, English Teacher  
Central High, Providence, Rhode Island

Paula Milano, Title I Coordinator / Field Service Representative  
RI Department of Education, Providence, Rhode Island

Connie Pesce, Head Teacher and English Teacher  
Alternate Learning Project, Providence, Rhode Island

Arthur Petrosinelli, Assistant Principal  
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Joyce Sevigny, Parent

Dr. Robert Terrill, Superintendent of Schools  
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