

SLATER JUNIOR 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

Samuel Slater Junior High School is one of three junior high schools in Pawtucket, the fourth largest city in Rhode Island. Founded in 1671, Pawtucket established itself early on as an industrial center when Samuel Slater built the first textile mill in America here. Today over 300 diversified industries, small and large, operate within the city. Pawtucket is governed by an elected nine member council led by a president and a citywide elected, seven member school committee, who serve three year terms. Since 1996 a residency requirement has been in effect for all city employees. Newly hired employees must move to Pawtucket within six months of their hiring.

Until the 1980's Slater housed grades seven, eight, and nine. At that time, because of overcrowding problems, sixth graders were moved into the building, but remained under the governance of the Cunningham Elementary School next door. Today grades six, seven, and eight are housed here. They come from four feeder schools: Greene, Varieur, Baldwin, and Cunningham.

The 560 students of Slater Junior High School represent a wonderful mix of ethnic diversity: 1% are American Indian; 1% are Asian; 27% are Hispanic; 28% are Black; and 43% are White. 78% of the students here receive free or reduced price federal lunch; approximately 20% of the students receive

some type of special education services; 59% of the students do not live with both parents; and more than 35% of the students do not speak English at home.

The school is served by 44 full time teachers, 2 guidance counselors, and 14 other part time teachers and staff. 6 teacher assistants and 14 other non-certified staff are also employed in the building. In addition, Slater Junior High School has many parent and community volunteers in the building daily.

Built in 1914, Slater had gradually deteriorated into what has been described by one former mayor as a “dungeon”. Today, however, thanks to several bond issues, the perseverance of a strong parents’ group, The Friends of Slater, and the active participation of the faculty, many renovations have made the building a bright and welcoming place in which to learn.

In 1996, Slater became a Carnegie school. Since then many changes have transformed the organization of the school. Teams have been established; teachers have common planning periods each week; progress reports are given to all students halfway between each quarter; and while students are still grouped homogeneously for academic classes, for all other classes they are grouped heterogeneously.

Supplementing the academic program at Slater teachers and others offer many extra activities and programs for the students all of which contribute to Slater students’ high attendance rate. Noteworthy among the many programs in place to support the families of Slater students as well as the students themselves are the Child Opportunity Zone (COZ), the school-based health center, and the A+ Adventure Program.

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 Slater Junior High School from November 16-19.1999, 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. This Visiting Team was composed of Rhode Island five classroom teachers, a principal, a representative of the Rhode Island Middle Level Educators (RIMLE), a parent, and a representative of the Rhode Island Department of Education. Their affiliations are included in Appendix A.

Slater 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 Slater Junior High School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 102 classes were observed. Of these 93 full class periods were observed. This totaled to 73 hours of classroom observation. All teachers were observed at least once and most teachers were observed more than once.
- many observations of the school (outside of classroom)
- conversations and interviews with many staff, students, and school administrators
- following 9 students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- meeting with students
- meeting with parents
- meeting with principal
- meeting with School Support Services review team
- meeting with Pawtucket Superintendent of Schools and Pawtucket Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education
- conversation with Pawtucket Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education
- School Improvement Plan
- meeting with the School Improvement Team
- examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school
- analysis of achievement and equity gaps based on *Information Works! 1999* data
- review of the following documents:
 - Slater JHS School Improvement Plan
 - Pawtucket School District Improvement Plan
 - district and school policy handbooks
 - *1999 Information Works! Data Book*
 - SALT Survey Report

- Professional Development Activities

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 reached consensus agreement for each conclusion, each recommendation, and each commendation and 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 Slater 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 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

Slater Junior High School has begun the journey toward becoming a model urban middle level school. Slater serves a culturally rich population and provides a safe and especially responsive environment for

students and families. All of the teachers, administrators, and staff give freely of their time and energy to create a place in which their students feel comfortable and valued as individuals. Their commitment to these students extends well beyond the school day to include a variety of after school activities that have the support and participation of a large number of students. Some teachers make home visits to students' families, give out their home phone numbers to help students with assignments, and some have even given of their time and effort to work on the refurbishing of parts of the building.

Slater Junior High School's designation as a Carnegie school in 1996 stimulated important changes for faculty and students. Interdisciplinary teaming has helped teachers to create smaller communities within the school and has provided teachers with opportunities to work collaboratively. While most teachers have accepted the concept of school reform, some have completely embraced it, and their classrooms reverberate with the energy of students actively engaged in their own learning.

Unfortunately, not many of Slater's teachers fully understand what the implementation of standards based instruction means. That limited understanding of standards based instruction, the homogeneous grouping of most students for academic classes, and a haphazard approach towards professional development all stand as roadblocks to the Slater Junior High School community reaching its mission for all students to "achieve high educational standards". They have most of the pieces for the complete puzzle, but haven't fit them together yet.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- 1999 *Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- 1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment

Conclusions

Math scores in all areas are a significant concern. 90% of the students taking the Concepts sub-test and 91% of the students taking the Problem Solving sub-test of the New Standards Reference Exams do not meet the standard. (*Information Works! 1999—1998 scores*)

Writing scores for seventh graders are grim. Only 19% of seventh grade students achieve the standard on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment)

Although 77% of the students achieve the standard on the Writing: Effectiveness sub-test of the New Standards Reference Exam and 64% achieve the standard on the Writing: Conventions sub-test, only

43% achieve the standard on the Reading: Basic Understanding sub-test; and fewer, only 23%, achieve the standard on the Reading: Analysis and Interpretation sub-test. (*Information Works! 1999—1998 scores*)

One gender and several equity gaps (a gap of at least 15%) exist in the results of the English Language Arts sub-tests of the New Standards Reference Exams. The gender gap exists between males and females in both of the English Language Arts sub-tests with female students scoring higher than male students. Equity gaps between general education and special education students, and between White and Other students, in both of the English Language Arts sub-tests show that general education and White students score higher. It is particularly disturbing that no special education students meet the standard in the Reading: Analysis and Interpretation sub-test. (*Information Works! 1999—1998 scores*)

Equity gaps exist in the Mathematics sub-tests of the New Standards Reference Exams. Gaps between general education and special education students, and between White and Black as well as Hispanic students in the Mathematics: Skills sub-test show that no special education students achieve the standard and White students score higher than Black and Hispanic students. A final gap exists between White students and all other student categories in Mathematics: Problem Solving with White students scoring higher. (*Information Works! 1999—1998 scores*)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Slater Junior High School:

Use the newest student assessment results when they are available to develop an appropriate plan of action that addresses the identified deficiencies.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations with teachers and members of the Multi-Disciplinary Team
- *Information Works! 1999* (1998 scores)
- SALT Survey 1999
- Following students
- Meetings with School Improvement Team, School Support Services review team, school administrators, district administrators, parents, and students

Conclusions

Many teachers are attempting to implement standards based instruction and assessment without a clear understanding of what that means and without making fundamental changes in their instruction. The ill-adapted use of rubrics, poorly structured small group work, the over-dependence on whole class instruction, and the assignment of isolated projects do not increase student learning. (Classroom observations, Conversations with teachers, SALT Survey 1999, Examination of student work, Following students)

The focus on Reading is admirable; however, silent reading and the addition of an extra period of reading for some students are not sufficient to increase student reading performance. Direct instruction in reading strategies is not used consistently in English Language Arts classes or in the other academic subject areas. (Classroom observations, Following students, Conversations with teachers, SALT Survey 1999, Meetings with School Improvement Team, school administrators, and district administrators, *Information Works! 1999—1998 scores*)

Few teachers challenge their students in classrooms. With some notable exceptions, teachers ask recall questions, call on the same students repeatedly, fail to engage all students all the time, and permit excessive down time. They do not stretch student thinking nor do they help students to claim ownership in their work. (Classroom observations, Meetings with students and parents, Examination of student work, SALT Survey 1999)

While great strides have been taken for the inclusion of special education students into regular education classrooms, current instructional practices often are not successful for either the special education students or the general education students. Teacher expectations for all students in these classes are extremely low. (Classroom observations, Conversations with members of the Multi-Disciplinary Team, Meeting with School Support Services review team)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Slater Junior High School:

Continue and extend professional development in standards based instruction and assessment and include in-class modeling, shared planning, and ongoing support for each teacher.

Provide professional development in instructional strategies such as differentiation of instruction, cooperative learning, and multiple intelligences.

Engage in professional development around the teaching of reading.

Investigate effective models of inclusion programs.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Pawtucket School District:

Provide more time and more resources for effective professional development.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Meetings with school administrators, district administrators, School Improvement Team, parents, students, School Support Services review team
- Following students
- Conversations with COZ coordinator, A+ Program coordinator, and school staff, teachers, and school administrators
- Review of daily attendance reports
- SALT Survey 1999
- Examination of curriculum mapping sheets
- Review of School Improvement Plan

Conclusions

A genuinely valued, positive rapport is evident among students, administrators, and teachers. Most students like coming to school here because they know that their teachers care about them and that it is a safe place to be. Students love the wide variety of after-school programs. (SALT Survey 1999, Conversations with school administrators and teachers, Meetings with school administrators, district administrators, students, and parents, Examination of daily attendance reports, Classroom observations, Following students)

Parents are welcome here and made to feel a part of the school. Parents' concerns are respected. The school is a center for the community. The Child Opportunity Zone (COZ), the A+ Program, and the School-Based Health Clinic successfully work together with the school and the community to support children and families. (Meetings with parents, School Improvement Team, school administrators, and district administrators, Conversations with COZ coordinator, A+ Program coordinator, school staff)

All students are not equal in this school. Expectations and opportunities are not the same for all students because of current student placement practices in grades seven and eight. Students' resigned acceptance of divisions is detrimental emotionally, academically, and socially. (Classroom observations, Following students, Meetings with students, parents, and School Support Services review team, SALT Survey 1999)

The lack of a current curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to know what to teach. This leads to an

inconsistency in instruction and contributes to the low performance on state assessments. (Classroom observations, Conversations with teachers, Meetings with school administrators, district administrators, Examination of curriculum mapping sheets)

The School Improvement Plan, while it can become the guiding document for school improvement, lacks a realistic and focused timeframe for its full implementation. (Review of School Improvement Plan, Meeting with the School Improvement Team)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Slater Junior High School for:

The Child Opportunity Zone, the A+ Program, and the School-Based Health Program

The uniquely positive and nurturing environment

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Slater Junior High School:

Eliminate the current practice of grouping students by levels (1-10).

Develop standards based curricula in concert with the district.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Pawtucket School District:

Arrange time for on-going professional development opportunities during school time.

Begin immediately developing K-12 standards based curricula.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Conclusions

Many teachers are attempting to implement standards based instruction without a clear understanding of what that means and without making fundamental changes in their instruction. The ill-adapted use of rubrics, poorly structured small group work, the over-dependence on whole class instruction, and the assignment of isolated projects do not increase student learning. (Classroom observations, Conversations with teachers, SALT Survey 1999, Examination of student work, Following students)

The focus on Reading is admirable; however, silent reading and the addition of an extra period of reading for some students are not sufficient to increase student reading performance. Direct instruction in reading strategies is not used consistently in either English Language Arts classes or in the other academic subject areas. (Classroom observations, Following students, Conversations with teachers, SALT Survey 1999, Meetings School Improvement Team, school administrators, and district administrators, *Information Works! 1999--1998 scores*)

Few teachers challenge their students in classrooms. With notable exceptions, teachers ask recall questions, call on the same students repeatedly, fail to engage all students all the time, and permit excessive down time. They do not stretch student thinking nor do they help students to claim ownership in their work. (Classroom observations, Meetings with students and parents, Examination of student work, SALT Survey 1999)

All students are not equal in this school. Expectations and opportunities are not the same for all students based on current student placement practices in grades seven and eight. Students' resigned acceptance of divisions is detrimental emotionally, academically, and socially. (Classroom observations, Following students, Meetings with students and parents, SALT Survey 1999, Meeting with School Support Services review team)

The lack of a current curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to know what to teach. This leads to an inconsistency in instruction and contributes to the low performance on state assessments. (Conversations with teachers, Meetings with school administrators and district administrators, Analysis of school documents)

While great strides have been taken for the inclusion of special education students into regular education classrooms, current instructional practices often are not successful for either the special education students or the general education students. Teacher expectations for all students in these classes are extremely low. (Classroom observations, Conversations with members of the MDT, Meeting with School Support Services review team)

Final Advice to the School

Slater is a bright spot in the Pawtucket community, but even bright spots need polishing to bring out their full shine. You have started the hard work of school improvement and you are on the right path. As you move forward, carefully consider the recommendations in this report. Use them to channel all of your hard work. Look to your "notable exceptions". Let their depth of understanding further your own so that all students here at Slater can reach those high standards. We acknowledge the difficult task ahead and we believe that with a strong and focused effort, you will succeed.

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

*Walter Guest, Principal
Merry Caswell, Assistant Principal
*Marie Ahern, teacher, chairperson
*Karen Landry, president of PTO
John Anderson, business community
*Jane Stanford, parent
Margaret Brown, parent
Marianne Arcuri, parent
Cheryl O'Brien, parent
Stew Shaffer, teacher
*Michelle Ponton, teacher
Linda Karsulavitch, teacher
Roberta King, teacher
Hirsh Cristino, teacher
Cheryl Britland, teacher
Liz Fasteson, teacher
Kara Lisi, teacher
Claudia Vieira, teacher
Joan Garvey, teacher
Gerry Cannon, teacher
*Voting members for expenditure of professional development funds

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Sandra L. Olson, teacher
Grade 7 English/Language Arts, Team Leader
Ponaganset Middle School, Foster-Glocester
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Chair of the Team

Edward D. Benjamin, Jr, Grade 8 Math teacher, Team Leader
Woonsocket Middle School

Diane DiSanto, RIDE
Director: Office of Instruction and Work Force Development

Cynthia Mycroft, Special Education teacher
Nathan Bishop Middle School

John M. Niska, Rhode Island Middle Level Educators
Executive Director

Donna Perrotta, Music teacher
Oliver Hazard Perry Middle School

Mary Anne Roll, Parent

Deborah Raleigh, English teacher
Mt. Hope High School

Roy Seitsinger, Principal
Wickford Middle School

Tom Wilson, Principal
Catalpa Ltd.
Coach to the Team