

SOUTH ROAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Wakefield, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

December, 1999

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

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 Road Elementary School from November 30 to December 3, 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.

South Road Elementary School's *Self-Study 1999-2000* and School Improvement Plan served as the visiting team's first touchstone in coming to an understanding of the school.

However informative written reports may be, there is simply no substitute for being at the school while it is in session - in the classroom, in the lunchroom, on the playground, and in the hallways. The specific information generated by a team visit is about how the students, staff and administrators go about their day. Thus, this visit allowed professional colleagues and stakeholders to build informed judgments about the teaching and learning that actually takes place at South Road Elementary School.

The visiting team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 67 hours of classroom observation. All classrooms were visited at least once. All teachers were observed at least once. Most teachers were observed more than once
- many observations of the school (outside of classroom)
- following 5 students for a full day and one student for a half day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- conversations and interviews with many staff, students, and school administrators
- scheduled meetings with:
 - School Improvement Team
 - district superintendent
 - school principal
 - 25 parents
 - students
- examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school
- analysis of the school's performance on state assessments of standards
- review of the following documents:
 - district and school policies
 - *1998 Information Works! Data Book, 1999 Information Works! Data Book*
 - Professional Development Activities
 - SALT Survey Report
 - South Road Elementary School Self-Study 1999-2000
 - School Improvement Plan
 - District Strategic Plan 1999
 - Annual Report to the Office for Civil Rights for the 1998-99 School Year

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 24 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 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 Road Elementary 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 South Road 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. A PROFILE OF SOUTH ROAD SCHOOL

South Road School is located in a diverse community, ranging from single-family homes to apartment complexes and subsidized housing. It is part of the South Kingstown School System, which operates under the governance of the South Kingstown School Committee, a body of 7 members who are elected to staggered four-year terms.

The school was built in 1964. An addition was added in 1990. The school is on one level and the style is typical of schools that were built in the early 1960s. There are two long corridors that house classrooms,

a cafeteria with a stage, a library, and many small rooms for support staff. The school grounds have wonderful play areas and fields for the children.

South Road School has 330 students in grades K-6. Fifteen percent of the students participate in the free or reduced lunch program. Nine percent of the students are Black, 2 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 percent Native American, and 86 percent White. None of the students receive ESL or bilingual services.

Twenty-three teachers serve 15 classrooms. There are three first grades, two second grades, two third grades, a three/four split class, 2 fourth grades, 3 fifth grades, and two sixth grades. There are two self-contained classrooms. Support services include a full-time nurse, speech teacher, and reading teacher. The social worker works at South Road School three days a week and the school psychologist 2 1/2 days a week.

The principal is in her second year as administrator at South Road School.

A new writing program, Stack the Deck, was implemented this year. A successful student mediation program has been in effect for 7 years.

3. PORTRAIT OF SOUTH ROAD SCHOOL AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

South Road School is a nurturing, child-centered community. A smiling and efficient school secretary greets the visitor and immediately establishes a friendly atmosphere. Just outside the office through the classroom windows, the sight of children creating art projects or making wonderful music also welcomes the visitor.

The principal is an instructional leader who creates a level of trust among faculty and staff that promotes collaboration and supports attempts at innovative practices.

Energy and dedication to learning are evident in teachers, students, and staff. The faculty and the principal are committed to continuous improvement. The teachers have taken the initiative and begun the hard work of transition to standards-based instruction. The absence of a district standards-based curriculum, professional development opportunities, and up-to-date technology deprive teachers of common language, effective communication, and valuable tools for instruction.

Learning occurs through a variety of interactive activities appropriate to the ages and interests of elementary school children. Classrooms display standards in children's language, but student work is not showcased.

Students are well behaved and respectful of their environment and of each other. A comfortable rapport

exists between staff and students.

The school is filled to capacity. Many activities are held in the hallways. The playground, surrounded by woods containing a walking path, is safe, and engaging. Recess activities are well supervised.

South Road School is a good school with the potential to become a quality elementary school where all students meet or exceed national standards.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

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

Conclusions

It is disappointing that on the RI State Writing Test only 7 percent (4 children) of third graders met the standard in 1999 and only 14 percent (8 children) in 1998. (1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment, 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment)

On the English Language Arts New Standards Reference Exam fourth grade students performed well on the reading subtests with 84 percent meeting the standard in Basic Understanding. However, fewer than 50 percent achieved the standard on the writing sub-tests. (1998 State Assessment results)

On the Mathematics New Standards Reference Exam fourth graders performed below similar students on the Skills and Concepts sub-tests. On the Problem Solving sub-test only 19 percent achieved the standard. (1998 State Assessment results)

An equity gap (a difference of 15% or greater) exists between males and females with males scoring higher on the Skills and Problem Solving sub-tests of the 1998 Mathematics New Standards Reference Exam. (*1999 Information Works!*)

An equity gap (a difference of 15% or greater) exists between the general education and special education populations with general education students performing higher on the Skills sub-test on the 1998 Mathematics New Standards Reference Exam. (*1999 Information Works!*)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that South Road Elementary School:

Continue to focus on the development of writing skills and strategies to close gaps.

Provide students with math and writing assignments that resemble state testing tasks.

Examine new test results as soon as they become available to determine equity gaps. Consider the issues raised in the Annual Civil Rights Report.

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Following a student
- Conversations with teachers, students and staff
- School Improvement Team meeting
- Meetings with School Improvement Team, school administrators, district administrators, students, and parents
- 1998 state assessment results
- SALT Survey 1999
- Examination of student work

Conclusions

The lack of updated district curriculum forces teachers to develop their own curriculum and leads to a lack of continuity within and across grade levels. This is especially evident in the area of reading where there are no clearly identified grade-level, standards-based outcomes. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers, meeting with district administrator, parent meeting)

Teachers understand the need to address standards in their classrooms. Early efforts at using writing standards indicate that with further support teachers will use them as effective teaching tools. (School Improvement Team meeting, classroom observations, review of student work, conversations with teachers)

Many teachers make an effort to employ a variety of teaching strategies--e.g., paired reading, buddy system, jig-saw, graphic organizers, cooperative learning, etc. -- to aid instruction. However, there is too little direct instruction to present new skills and content. The use of technology as an instructional tool is also limited. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers and staff)

Prompted by low state test scores, South Road School teachers investigated and selected a school wide

writing program. Most teachers regularly use student work in writing to set individual student goals. This emphasis on writing results in more and varied student writing across the curriculum. (School Improvement Team meeting, classroom observations, review of student work)

The inconsistent use of the math program, Mathland, the limited time devoted to direct math instruction, and the lack of training --especially for new teachers -- contribute to gaps in students' knowledge. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers, Mathematics New Standards Reference Exam)

Most teachers provide excellent, hands-on science instruction that encourages critical thinking and application to the real world using the GEMS-Net Initiative. (following a student, classroom observations, conversations with students, review of student work)

The lack of structure and accountability during "choice" or "RAP" (reading and Preparation) times results in a loss of learning/instruction time. (classroom observations, following a student, parent meeting)

The SALT Visiting Team commends South Road Elementary School for:

Interactive learning

Independent reading initiative

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that South Road Elementary School:

Increase time devoted to math instruction to close gaps to standards.

Provide appropriate intervention strategies to all first graders who demonstrate an academic or social need.

Use technology as a teaching and learning strategy.

Make available summer and after school opportunities that support students' learning.

Maximize student accountability by developing with students clear and consistent guidelines for appropriate use of "RAP" and "choice" times.

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

Support the efforts of South Road School's teachers by providing New Standards Course One training.

Begin immediately to develop a district English Language Arts standards-based curriculum.

Continue to support the math program with professional development.

Provide professional development to teachers in the use of technology in the classroom.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Meeting with School Improvement Team
- *Information Works 1999*
- *SALT Survey 1999*
- Meetings with school and district administrators
- Meeting with parents
- Meeting with students
- Conversations with teachers and staff
- Following students
- South Kingstown School Department Staff Evaluation document

Conclusions

Faculty members are empowered by the principal who not only recognizes their expertise, but also encourages them to make curriculum decisions. (conversations with teachers and staff, meeting with district administrator, meeting with parents, meeting with students)

In the absence of a district-mentoring plan, veteran teachers voluntarily provide informal support and guidance to new teachers. This support is especially important because of the lack of curriculum and professional development for new staff. (conversations with teachers, meeting with school administrator)

Some teachers in collaboration with colleagues have provided the leadership and initiative to address student needs in response to testing results - - e.g., instituting a new writing program, writing standards in child friendly language, planning within grade levels. (conversations with teachers, meetings with district and school administrators)

Although eight staff members participate in the Rhode Island Teachers in Technology Initiative, the

media center and classrooms do not have sufficient hardware to provide instruction in information technology. It is disappointing that the district does not support South Road School with up- to-date technology, sufficient hardware and software, Internet connections in all classrooms, and adequate professional development. (classroom observations, meetings with district administrator and school administrator, School Improvement Team meeting)

Parents report a need for more information from the school about grade level expectations, student progress, and new initiatives at the school. There is also concern about the lack of curriculum and continuity of instruction across the grades. This lack of communication limits informed parent involvement. Several teachers, however, provide evening opportunities for parents to share their children's work—e.g., family math night, portfolio sharing. (1999 Salt Survey-Parent Chart A4, parent meeting, conversations with teachers)

A student mediation program (Students as Mediators) with fifth and sixth grade volunteer mediators has been in place for seven years. This program effectively provides students opportunities to resolve conflicts appropriately. (student meeting, conversations with staff, observation of a mediation training session)

There is little evidence of partnership with community agencies or resources. This deprives students and teachers of valuable, real world learning experiences. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers, meeting with school administrator)

The principal evaluates teachers according to South Kingstown School Department Staff Evaluation Process. Although goal setting is optional in the district requirements, the principal regularly sets annual performance goals with teachers who are evaluated. (conversations with teachers, meeting with school administrator)

The SALT Visiting Team commends South Road Elementary School for:

The efforts of individual teachers to showcase student work for parents at convenient times

SAM (Students as Mediators)

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that South Road Elementary School:

Inform parents about efforts to improve instruction and curriculum.

Begin a technology users group to support current technology users and encourage more teacher involvement.

Encourage teacher collaboration by scheduling common unassigned time for grade level teachers.

Build a partnership with a community agency, university, or business that will enhance teaching and learning.

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

Purchase adequate computer software and hardware and provide ongoing technical support for classrooms and support staff.

Maintain and expand computer-networking capability.

Expand the Parents as Teachers program to help schools build stronger ties with families

Develop a district wide mentoring program.

7. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Conclusions

Teachers understand the need to address standards in their classrooms. Early efforts at using writing standards indicate that with further support teachers will use them as effective teaching tools. (School Improvement Team meeting, classroom observations, review of student work, conversations with teachers)

The lack of updated district curriculum forces teachers to develop their own curriculum and leads to a lack of continuity within and across grade levels. This is especially evident in the area of reading where there are no clearly identified grade-level, standards-based outcomes. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers, meeting with district administrator, parent meeting)

Eight staff members participate in the Rhode Island Teachers and Technology Initiative. The media center does not have sufficient hardware to provide instruction in information technology. It is disappointing that the district does not support South Road School with up to date technology, sufficient hardware and software, Internet connections in all classrooms, and adequate professional development. (classroom observations, meetings with district administrator and school administrator, School Improvement Team meeting)

Many teachers make an effort to employ a variety of teaching strategies--e.g., paired reading, buddy system, jig-saw, graphic organizers, cooperative learning, etc. -- to aid instruction. However, there is too little direct instruction to present new skills and content. The use of technology as an instructional tool is also limited. (classroom observations, conversations with teachers and staff)

It is disappointing that on the RI State Writing Test only 7 percent (4 children) of third graders met the standard in 1999 and only 14 percent (8 children) in 1998. (1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment, 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment)

Final Advice to the School

The visiting team feels that this report to South Road School affirms what you already know about your school. We hope the report will support you as you develop the action plans for your School Improvement Plan. The District Strategic Plan supports your goals. Insist that the district begin planned curriculum work immediately so that you are not working in isolation.

You have begun the work of becoming a standards-based school. Maintain these efforts remembering that it does not happen overnight. Focus professional activities on the goal of closing gaps.

You have strong parent involvement in the programs at South Road School. Nurture your relationships with families by informing them about your curriculum efforts.

APPENDIX

MEMBERS OF SOUTH ROAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

Kim Bissonnette, Parent
Paul Boivin, Parent
Wendy Boivin, Parent
Pat Fogarty, Teacher
Tim Geremia, Parent
David Moretti, Parent
Lara Naccarato, Teacher
Lori Romano, Parent
Claire Schwarzbach, Teacher
Susan Smith, Parent

Christina Willet, Teacher

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Carol Belair, Grade 4 Teacher
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(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as SALT Fellow
Chair of the Team

Suzanne Bartlett
National Board Certified Teacher
Tiogue School, Coventry

Nancy Beye
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