

WOONSOCKET HIGH SCHOOL

Woonsocket, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

December, 1999

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1. 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 Woonsocket High School from December 7, 1999 to December 10, 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.

In the absence of a formal School Improvement Plan for Woonsocket High School the Visiting Team's used a variety of documents 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 Woonsocket High School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- a total of 89 full classroom observations and 102 partial classroom observations which totaled over 196 hours of time spent in direct classroom observation. Most classrooms were visited at least once. Most teachers were observed more than once
- many observations of the school (outside of classroom)
- following 16 students for a full day
- observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day
- scheduled meetings with the following groups:
 - the School's School Improvement Team
 - building and district administrators
 - the curriculum council
 - students
 - parents
 - student council
- conversations and interviews with many staff, students, and school administrators
- examination of student work, including a selection of work collected by the school
- analysis of achievement and equity gaps based on Infoworks Data
- district and school policies
- review of professional development activities
- Review of classroom assessments.
- Review of the following documents:
 - School Improvement Plan
 - District Strategic Plan
 - SALT Survey Report
 - New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) 1994 Visiting Committee Report
 - Departmental Curricula
 - *1998 Information Works!* Data Book
 - *1999 Information Works!* Data Book
 - classroom textbooks

- 1999 Rhode Island Writing Results,
- Woonsocket High School Advanced Placement Test results
- Woonsocket High School Scholastic Aptitude Test scores

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 reached consensus agreement for each conclusion, each recommendation, and each commendation 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 Woonsocket 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 Woonsocket, and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility.

Following the Team's summary statement, Portrait of Woonsocket High 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. PROFILE OF WOONSOCKET HIGH SCHOOL

Woonsocket High School is the one high school serving grades 9-12 for the city of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. It is part of the Woonsocket School System, Woonsocket is an urban city with a population of approximately 44,000. The present school first opened its doors to students in September, 1972.

A 5 member school committee whose members are elected to four-year terms governs the Woonsocket Public School District. A Mayor and a 7 member city council govern the town. Woonsocket High School students are served by a professional staff of 4 administrators, 135 full and part-time faculty, 21 aides and support personnel, and 9 custodians.

Of the 1713 students attending Woonsocket High School 72.2 percent are White, 11.3 percent are Hispanic, 10.2 percent are Asian / Pacific Islander, 6.1 percent are Black, and .2 percent are Native American. Two hundred seventy-three students totaling 15.9 percent receive special education services, 35.9 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and students receive assistance from the Student Support Center.

The school is presently in its second year of 4 x 4 block scheduling which permits students to enroll in eight to sixteen classes per year, or four classes per day for an entire semester or quarter. The faculty and staff of Woonsocket High School also participated in the Breaking Ranks in the Ocean State Reform Network, and are presently working to incorporate standards and portfolios into their daily teaching practice.

A School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) Visit was conducted at Woonsocket Area Career and Technical Center at the same time as this SALT visit. While each report is separate, some readers may find it important to consider both reports.

3. PORTRAIT OF WOONSOCKET HIGH SCHOOL AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Woonsocket High School is a safe, friendly school staffed by a caring and courageous faculty and administration with the best interests of their students at heart. Students feel comfortable within the school and both adults and children exhibit a sense of pride in this school. This environment supports a collegial atmosphere that is enhanced by the recent re-introduction of the mentoring program.

The faculty and administration at Woonsocket High School should be recognized for their positive attitude, and the steps they have taken in beginning the long process of positive change prior to a formal strategic plan being developed by either the district or the school.

Although the School Improvement Team has identified equity and achievement gaps, there is no coherent school plan with objectives, strategies or action plans for closing these achievement gaps. The district strategic plan states that

adults at the building and district level are working to help students "achieve academic, personal, and social skills to their fullest potential", but these adults have not demonstrated their belief that all students can achieve the same high standards.

There are several schools operating simultaneously within Woonsocket High School. Teachers and administrators have varying levels of expectations for students enrolled in these different programs. The quality and type of instruction, assignments, and feedback provided to students diminish from honors to college preparatory to academic classes respectively. It appears the perceived innate ability of students often determines the content covered and the quality of classroom activities, instruction, and feedback students receive.

Teachers' willingness to work on standards-based curricula during their unassigned periods, adopt new methods of assessment, and implement teaching strategies speaks to the high level of professionalism and student centeredness evident in this school. These commendable efforts have been hindered by the incomplete grasp and adoption of the philosophical underpinnings of the standards movement by faculty and administration.

There are numerous co-curricula and extra-curricula activities taking place at Woonsocket High School. Many parents are involved in the school through sporting events, band, etc., and the Parent Teacher Organization is developing a newsletter to better inform and involve parents in the education of their children. The commitment the adults and student body have for each other and the school are obvious. **It is unfortunate that this commitment of time and energy by all parties involved has not translated into community-wide financial support that goes beyond level funding for the past seven years.**

Woonsocket High School is definitely moving in the right direction. The faculty and building administration should be recognized for the positive work they have begun-switching to the block, writing standards-based curricula, adopting alternate methods of assessment, the emergent use of use of portfolios, and communicating across the curriculum to name a few-to change their school for the good of their students. Teachers and administrators clearly have a working relationship that creates a learning environment that supports responsible risk taking and the adoption of different teaching and learning strategies designed to improve student performance.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- *1999 Information Works!* (1998 scores)
- 1999 State Writing Assessment results
- Woonsocket High School SIT Committee Report

Conclusions

Equity gaps (a difference of greater than or equal to fifteen percent) exist among Asian (88 percent proficient), White (65 percent proficient), Hispanic (58 percent proficient), and Black (50 percent

proficient) students on the Math Skills portion of the 1998 New Standards Reference Exam. (Woonsocket High School SIT Committee Report, 1999 Infoworks)

Equity gaps exist among White (18 percent proficient), Hispanic (18 percent proficient), Asian (2 percent proficient), and Black (0 percent proficient) students on the Math Problem-Solving portion of the 1998 New Standards Reference Exam. (Woonsocket High School SIT Committee Report, 1999 Infoworks)

Equity gaps exist between female (41percent proficient) and male (23 percent proficient) students on the 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (Woonsocket High School SIT Committee Report, 1999 Infoworks)

Equity gaps exist between White (40 percent proficient) and Black (8 percent proficient) students on the 1998 Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (Woonsocket High School SIT Committee Report, 1999 Infoworks)

Twenty-two percent of Woonsocket High School students achieved the standard on the 1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (1999 State Writing Assessment results)

Note: The data the school and visiting team used to identify performance and equity gaps predates the school's switch to a block schedule. To develop a realistic plan to close gaps in student performance, the School Improvement Team will need to evaluate the 1999 test scores of the New Standards Reference Exam when they are released.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Woonsocket High School:

Review the data from the 1999 New Standards Reference Exams and other available data to determine equity and performance gaps.

Develop a realistic plan with tactics and strategies to close gaps in student performance

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- Classroom observations
- Examination of student work
- Conversations and interviews with many staff, students, and school administrators
- *1999 Information Works!* (1997-1998 scores)

- SALT Survey 1999
- Following students
- Review of textbooks
- Review of curricula
- Meetings with School Improvement Team, school administrators, district administrators, students, and parents
- Examination of classroom assessments
- Review of professional development plan 1999-2000
- Memo from building principal to superintendent and school committee, February 10,1999)
- Woonsocket High School Block Survey
- Two faculty votes on the block

Conclusions

The Woonsocket High School faculty, led and supported by building administration, shows a commendable willingness to change both school organizational patterns and classroom practices. (administrative interviews, faculty interviews, School Improvement Team meeting, classroom observation, the Woonsocket High School Block Survey, two faculty votes on the block)

There is disparity among academic, college preparatory, and honors programs regarding expectations for student achievement, quality of instructional activities, and types of feedback provided to students. This lack of consistent rigor hinders the students' ability to develop mastery of standards, as measured by the New Standards Reference Exam, and the Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (classroom observation, examination of student work, meeting with parents and students, review of curricula, review of textbooks)

There is great variation among and within departments with regard to the implementation of standards. Although many teachers have begun the process of adapting their instructional practices to a standards-based system, most lack an understanding of how to implement standards for all students in all classes. (review of curricula, classroom observations, examination of student work, student following, review of professional development plan 1999-2000, memo from building principal to superintendent and school committee, February 10,1999)

While the appropriate and effective use of rubrics is demonstrated by some teachers within the school, there is a general lack of understanding of the proper use of rubrics to provide clear direction for student performance, instructional feedback, and opportunities for students to assess and improve their own work. (classroom observations, student and teacher interviews, examination of student work, examination of classroom assessments)

In many academic and college preparatory classes the instructional focus is on the acquisition of basic skills. Teachers are not incorporating enough activities that develop students' problem solving and higher order thinking skills. This is evident in the poor student performance on the 1998 New Standards

Reference Exam. (classroom observations, review of textbooks, student following, examination of student work, 1999 Infoworks)

The process of assembling formative portfolios has begun, with the support of the curriculum committee and professional development opportunities offered to the faculty. However, teachers need a clearly articulated plan and ongoing professional development to integrate portfolios as a method of authentic assessment. (meeting with building administration and students, conversations and interviews with teachers)

Communication across the curriculum (writing, reading, speaking) has been adopted as a central focus for this year by all departments. Some teachers have taken steps to include communication in their classrooms. However, this initial effort must be significantly expanded and embraced by the entire school if Woonsocket High School is to have all students achieving standard on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (meeting with School Improvement Team, 1999 SALT Survey, 1999 Rhode Island Writing Scores)

The 4 x 4 block schedule has provided opportunity for more engaging methods of instruction. However, it is apparent that many teachers need additional training and resources to design, develop, and implement standards-based lessons and additional strategies to engage students and use class time more effectively. (conversations and interviews with teachers, classroom observations)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Woonsocket High School for:

a willingness to embrace change and venture into new reforms.

taking the first steps necessary to incorporate standards and alternative methods of assessment.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Woonsocket High School:

Evaluate the implementation of the current communication across the curriculum practices and develop a plan to ensure the inclusion of all disciplines in the process.

Continue staff development in standards-based instruction. Focus on the issue of perceived innate ability versus the impact of student effort, an underlying principle of the standards movement.

Incorporate the same high expectations, quality of instructional activities, and types of feedback for students in all programs.

Provide appropriate professional development to enable teachers to clearly

define the purpose of portfolios and create a plan to effectively use portfolios as an authentic means of assessment to improve student performance.

Increase the use of instructional strategies that promote problem solving and critical thinking skills such as: Socratic seminars, cooperative learning, student-led discussions, online research, long-term projects and oral presentations in all classes.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Woonsocket School District:

Provide the time and resources necessary for job imbedded staff development, particularly in-class modeling, on the effective use of rubrics and incorporate them in the curriculum.

Provide ongoing professional development in the areas of standards and assessment as requested by the building administration and School Improvement Team.

Provide the standards-based training and resources necessary to support the leadership roles of administrators, department chairs, and teachers.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- School and classroom observations
- Meeting with district and school administration
- Meeting with School Improvement Team
- Meetings and interviews with teachers
- Meeting with parents
- Meeting and interviews with students
- Following students
- School Improvement Plan
- District Strategic Plan
- Student enrollment data,
- Meeting with guidance
- Review of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores
- Review of Advanced Placement scores,
- Review of 1999 Rhode Island Writing scores

Conclusions

The existing block schedule at Woonsocket High School creates a serious problem that does not allow students full access to the appropriate resource services specified by student Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Teachers and administration recognize this problem and have begun to address this issue. (interviews with guidance and resource teachers, meeting with building administrators, classroom observation)

There is a lack of a formal accountability system for the improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom. The administration and union have not defined and implemented an evaluation system to facilitate, coach, and lead department heads and teachers through the implementation of standards-based instruction, authentic assessments, rubrics, and portfolios. This problem is compounded in content areas without department chairs. (Conversations and interviews with teachers, meetings with building and district administrators and the curriculum committee)

The atmosphere at Woonsocket High School affords students, faculty, staff, and administration a safe, orderly, clean, and comfortable environment conducive to teaching and learning. This sense of family extends beyond the building to the community-at-large. (school and classroom observations, following a student, conversations with teachers)

The rudimentary School Improvement Plan requires objectives and strategies for closing either performance or equity gaps. In the absence of a district strategic plan, many school improvement activities have been initiated, but Woonsocket High School must create a specific plan that involves parents, students, and other stakeholders in its creation and implementation. (School Improvement Plan, District Strategic Plan, meetings with building administrators and School Improvement Team, meeting with parents)

The school and district have demonstrated a strong commitment to incorporate technology into the programs offered at Woonsocket High School. Teachers' proficiency with the use and integration of technology into their daily classroom varies between and among departments. However, this initiative could be enhanced with additional training, and a concerted school-wide attempt to incorporate technology into standards-based curricula and instruction. (conversations and interviews with teachers, classroom observations, meetings with central administration)

Woonsocket High School does not engage in a continuous cycle of self-examination, which includes repeatedly generating and using multiple sources of information and data to improve teaching and learning. (meeting with School Improvement Team, meeting with building administrators, student enrollment data, meeting with guidance, Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores, Advanced Placement scores, 1999 RI Writing scores)

The SALT Visiting Team commends Woonsocket High School for:

Fostering a strong relationship among students, faculty, staff, and administration, which is conducive to

teaching and learning

Providing a safe, orderly, clean, and comfortable environment

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that Woonsocket High School:

Work through the School Improvement Team to devise a plan that insures resource students are equitably serviced under the 4 x 4 block schedule.

Increase community and parent representation on the School Improvement Team to mirror the diverse community.

Continue to invest in upgrading computers, software, and other forms of instructional technology.

Offer further professional development for administrators and faculty to integrate technology into the curriculum.

Create a culture of self-examination and the capacity to use multiple sources of information and data for the purpose of school improvement.

Immediately create objectives, strategies, and action plans in the School Improvement Plan designed to close the equity and achievement gaps in student performance.

Clearly define the authority of the School Improvement Team.

The SALT Visiting Team recommends that the Woonsocket School District:

Work with Woonsocket High School to create a culture of self-examination and the capacity to use multiple sources of information and data for the purpose of school improvement.

Immediately devise and implement a clearly defined performance based evaluation system for administrators and teachers designed to improve teaching and learning.

7. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Most Important Conclusions

The rudimentary School Improvement Plan requires objectives and strategies for closing either performance or equity gaps. In the absence of a district strategic plan, many school improvement activities have been initiated, but Woonsocket High School must create a specific plan that involves parents, students, and other stakeholders in its creation and implementation.

There is disparity among academic, college preparatory, and honors programs regarding expectations for student achievement, quality of instructional activities, and types of feedback provided to students. This lack of consistent rigor hinders the students' ability to develop mastery of the standards as measured by the New Standards Reference Exam.

Woonsocket High School does not engage in a continuous cycle of self-examination, which includes repeatedly generating and using multiple sources of information and data to improve teaching and learning.

There is a lack of a formal accountability system for the improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom. The administration and union have not defined an evaluation system to facilitate, coach, and lead department heads and teachers through the implementation of standards-based instruction, authentic assessments, rubrics, and portfolios. This problem is compounded in content areas without department chairs.

There is great variation among and within departments with regard to the implementation of standards. Although many teachers have begun the process of adapting their instructional practices to a standards-based system, most lack an understanding of how to implement standards for all students in all classes.

Faculty, led and supported by building administration, shows a commendable willingness to change both school organizational patterns and classroom practices.

Final Advice to the School

The Woonsocket High School attitude, demonstrated across the board by faculty, administration, parents and students, should be recognized as a making a significant contribution by the entire community. All involved were open and forthright in their assessment of their school and what needs to be done to better serve the children of this district.

The SALT visiting team-comprised of a parent and educators from around the state who volunteered their time to serve on this team-worked from 6:50 AM to 5:30 PM on Tuesday and 6:50 AM until 9:30 PM on the three remaining days.

It is because of your caring and commitment to education, and your willingness to candidly communicate the strengths and areas of concern within Woonsocket High School, that our team worked so hard to produce a final report that accurately communicates the strengths and areas of concern that

everyone so candidly shared. Your candor not only makes you contributors to the final report, but also the benefactors of it as well.

While teachers have received varying amounts of training, their knowledge and application of standards differs greatly between and among departments. Both teachers and administrators could benefit from observing first-hand the teachers within the school who are effectively incorporating standards and rubrics, as well as more in-depth professional development focused on standards, incorporating technology into the curricula, and the use of authentic methods of assessment.

Continue to work on the development of standards-based curricula and make a conscientious effort to include engaging problems specifically designed to develop students communication and higher order thinking in all honors, college, academic, and vocational classes.

There is tremendous talent and ability within the confines of this school. You need to find a way to tap this valuable resource, to observe the work of colleagues who have already demonstrated proficiency with your chosen direction for reform-standards-based instruction and assessment-and have them provide training for others within the school.

Woonsocket High School has demonstrated a clear commitment to change. This is evident by your move to a block schedule and all the reforms that you began before a formal plan emerged from the district. Your efforts could benefit greatly from a clearly defined cohesive School Improvement Plan, aligned to the district plan, with a method of evaluation that insures everyone is moving in the same direction with the same focus. Continuing down the path you have begun can only lead to improvements in student performance.

APPENDIX TO THE VISITING TEAM'S REPORT

MEMBERS OF THE WOONSOCKET SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Edward Chmiel

John Ward

Edward Boucher

Michael Lavigne

Deborah Heath

MEMBERS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

Eileen Passano, Chair

Dennis Kafalas, Teacher

John Marsella, Teacher

Kathy Rooney, Teacher

Steve Burke, Teacher

Gail O'Rourke, Dept. Head Representative

Robin Corrigan, Social Services

Anmy L'Esperance, Student

Jodi LeBrun, Parent

John Symynkywicz, Community Representative

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

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