



WESTERN HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Cranston, Rhode Island

SALT Visit Team Report

March 3, 2000



School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT)

The accountability program of the Rhode Island Department of Education

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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 Western Hills Middle School from February 29, 2000 to March 3, 2000 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.

The 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 Western Hills Middle School.

The visiting team collected its evidence from the following:

- *a total of 193 classes were observed. Of these 160 full class periods were observed. All teachers were observed at least once and many were observed more than once.*
- *many observations of the school (outside of classroom)*
- *following 13 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*
 - *students*
 - *parents*
- *conversations and interviews with many teachers, students, and school administrators*
- *observations of Team Planning meetings*
- *examination of student work, including a selection of work collected by the school*
- *analysis of achievement and equity gaps based on Information Works! 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*
 - *Curriculum Documents*
 - *1998, 1999 Information Works! Data Book*
 - *1998, 1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment*
 - *1998,1999 New Standards Reference Exams*
 - *SALT Survey Reports*

- Teacher Evaluation Handbook
- Western Hills Middle School Shadowing Committee Conclusions
- *Cranston teacher contract*
- Western Hills Middle School Article 31 Funding and Staff Development *binder*
- *teacher evaluation instrument*

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 26 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 Western Hills Middle 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 Cranston School Department, the citizens of Cranston and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility.

Following the Team's summary statement, Portrait of Western Hills Middle School at the Time of the Visit, team conclusions, commendations and recommendations are presented for each of the SALT focus areas. The report 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 WESTERN HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Western Hills Middle School is one of three middle schools serving grades six through eight in the city of Cranston, Rhode Island. The building opened in 1969 as a junior high school, piloted interdisciplinary teaming in the seventh grade in 1989 that contributed to the district's decision to convert all three of the city's junior high schools to middle schools in 1995. Seven elementary schools feed into Western Hills Middle School, and Western Hills is the primary feeder school for Cranston High School West, one of two high schools in the city.

One principal, one assistant principal, eighty-one teachers and four teacher assistants serve the 997 students of Western Hills Middle School. Western Hills Middle School is part of the Cranston school system, which is governed by a five member, city-wide elected school committee.

Ninety-seven percent, or 948 of the students attending Western Hills Middle School are White with the remaining three percent made up of 17 Hispanic students, 15 Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 3 Black students. 143 students or fifteen percent of the total student population receive special education services. 43 students totaling four-and-a-half percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

3. PORTRAIT OF WESTERN HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Western Hills Middle School is a safe, caring, student-centered school. Students and teachers have a mutual respect for each other, clearly like this school, and want to be here. The faculty and administration are talented, hardworking, and willing to change and grow to better meet the needs of their students. This is evident by the large School Improvement Team and the test scores the students in this school have earned. While this school is good, it does have the capacity to be excellent.

Presently, there is not a clearly agreed upon vision of what a middle school should be; a difference between elementary and secondary philosophies exists within various groups in this school. This lack of a common vision extends beyond the middle school concept. While teachers and administrators are all working hard in a variety of ways to "make a good school better," the school's goals and objectives are not measurable, universally shared, or understood. Teachers and administrators do not have a universally accepted understanding of what their "better" school looks like and are not focusing all of their considerable talents and energy in the same direction.

The talent and expertise of the Western Hills Middle School faculty are clearly evident. Teachers are extremely adept at providing a sound educational foundation focused on the acquisition of knowledge and basic skills, an education for which they were trained. Proficiency in the new strategies of teaching and learning required in a standards-based education, however, varies widely among the professional staff.

In many classrooms, assignments and instruction result in missed opportunities for students to make connections between and among the disciplines and for students to develop higher-order thinking skills. Generally, the types of assessments used provide minimal information to either students or teachers regarding students' understanding of concepts and other higher-order thinking skills.

Both the administration and professional staff have had some but not enough ongoing and in-depth professional development focused on standards-based instruction, assessment, teaming, strategic planning, and middle school organization. Further training, coupled with the new building leadership and a talented and re-energized faculty, will provide Western Hills with a powerful opportunity to pull together to meet the needs of all of its students more effectively.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- *1999 Information Works! (1998 scores)*
- *1999 State Writing Assessment results*
- *1999 New Standards Reference Exam results*

Conclusions

Sixty-one percent of Western Hills Middle School students achieve or exceed the standard on the Reading Basic Understanding subtest of the New Standards Reference Exam, and thirty-one percent achieve the standard on the Reading Analysis and Interpretation subtest. (1999 New Standards Reference Exam results)

Fifty-six percent of students achieve or exceed the standard on the Writing Effectiveness subtest of the New Standards Reference Exam, and sixty-one percent achieve or exceed the standard on the Writing Conventions subtest. (1999 New Standards Reference Exam results)

On the Mathematics Reference Examination Western Hills students' scores vary widely. Seventy-one percent of the students tested meet or exceed the standard on the Mathematical Skills subtest, thirty percent meet or exceed the standard on the Concepts subtest, and forty percent meet or exceed the standard on the Problem Solving subtest. It should be noted, however, that on the Concepts subtest, twenty-two percent and on the Problem Solving subtest, fourteen percent of Western Hills students tested show "Little Evidence of Achievement". (1999 New Standards Reference Exam results)

Forty-three percent of Western Hills students tested meet or exceed the standard on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results)

Equity gaps (gaps of fifteen percent or greater) exist between General Education and Special Education students in all subtests with General Education students outperforming Special Education students. (*Information Works! 1999 Data – 1998 results*)

An ethnicity gap occurs between White and Asian/Pacific Islander students on three of the four subtests. Asian/Pacific Islander students outperformed White students. Too few test takers in the other ethnic groups make it impossible to determine if other gaps exist. (*Information Works! 1999 Data – 1998 results*)

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that Western Hills Middle School:

Evaluate the impact of existing programs and services on student achievement, expand the most effective practices, and implement new strategies to close the equity gaps that exist between general education and special education students.

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- *Classroom observations*
- *Examination of student work*
- *Conversations and interviews with teachers and students*
- *Following students*
- *Meetings with School Improvement Team, building administrators, students, and parents*
- *Western Hills Middle School Shadowing Committee Conclusions*

Conclusions

Teachers throughout the school are moving toward the use of standards in their instruction, although they are at various levels of implementation. All teachers have posted standards in their classrooms. Some teachers have begun to measure student performance against the standards. A few teachers have succeeded in making the standards real for their students, prompting one student to say, "It makes class easier. You don't have to rummage around for information. You know what you need to do." (classroom observations, following students, meetings with students and School Improvement Team, examination of student work)

Teachers are striving to successfully accommodate different learning styles by employing a variety of innovative teaching strategies, such as kinesthetic learning, reflective journals, manipulatives, persuasive and creative writing across the curriculum, and cooperative work groups. (classroom observations, meeting with students, examination of student work, *Western Hills Middle School Shadowing Committee Conclusions*)

Missed teaching opportunities exist in this school. Within the classroom, activities, assignments, projects, and instruction often focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills in a specific subject and fail to move students to an understanding of concepts and higher level thinking. At the team level, connections between the various disciplines/subjects are not always clearly defined. Beyond the team, present scheduling restricts the collaboration among all teachers and the integration of all disciplines. (classroom observations, following students, meeting with students, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with teachers, meeting with building administrators)

Teachers sometimes exhibit inconsistencies in their expectations for students and the level of challenge varies between teachers and teams based on the perceived ability level of students. Therefore, not all students have the same opportunities for learning. (classroom observations, following students, meetings and conversations with students and parents, examination of student work)

Most teachers use assessments such as multiple choice, true-false, short answer, and fill in the blank which measure only the acquisition of skills and knowledge, not higher order thinking skills. Many teachers, generally, do not use assessments to inform, guide, and improve instruction. A few teachers, however, have begun to use assessments, including rubrics, to move from simply determining student acquisition of knowledge and skills to problem solving and concept development. (classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, meeting with students, *Western Hills Middle School Shadowing Committee Conclusions*)

SALT Visiting Team Commends Western Hills Middle School for:

The willingness of teachers to improve their instructional practice

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that Western Hills Middle School:

Identify teachers who use a variety of innovative teaching strategies. Structure opportunities for them to model these strategies for other teachers to advance their own practice.

Embrace the same expectations for all students. This is a philosophical underpinning of standards-based education and must be a belief held by the entire learning community if standards are to become a reality in this school.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- *Classroom observations*
- *Conversations with many teachers, students, and building administrators*
- *SALT Survey 1998-99 data*
- *Following students*
- *Meetings with building administrators, district administrators, students, and parents*
- *School Improvement Plan*
- *Review of district documents*
- *Observations of Team Planning meetings*
- *Review of Teacher Evaluation Handbook*
- *Review of Cranston teacher contract*
- *Review of Western Hills Middle School Article 31 Funding and Staff Development binder*

Conclusions

Both the faculty and the administration have demonstrated a willingness to share leadership in this school. This spirit of cooperation and the trust and respect that exists between and among these parties provide a strong foundation for teacher empowerment, shared decision making, and broad based strategic planning necessary to help all students reach high standards. (meeting with building administrators, conversations with teachers)

While this school is trying to improve, there is an unfocused vision of what a "better school" should look like. Philosophical differences exist about what it means to be a middle school. Furthermore, there is not a common understanding of what the standards mean for the learning of all students and how this impacts the organization of this school to support quality learning. (conversations with teachers, following students, classroom observations, meetings with parents, building, and district administrators)

Team Planning time works well at Western Hills Middle School. Team members and support personnel discuss student learning and achievement, design and modify lessons, begin to resolve discipline issues, identify student needs, and communicate with parents. They respect and accommodate each other's needs.

(observations of Team Planning meetings, conversations with teachers, meeting with building administrators, review of Cranston teacher contract)

Large class sizes, many over contractual limits, greatly hinder schedule flexibility and limit many classroom activities. Student centered learning, one-on-one student-teacher interaction, student access to technology, classroom management, and safety can be compromised by this classroom overcrowding. The large student body, exceeding the capacity of the physical plant, causes overcrowded hallways, long waiting lines during a brief lunch period, and little time for social interaction among students. (following students, classroom observations, meetings with students, parents, building, and district administrators, conversations with teachers, review of Cranston teacher contract)

The professional development offered at this school has built an awareness of standards and confirms teachers' willingness to improve their practice. This training as implemented, and as currently planned, is insufficient to equip teachers with the skills needed to use standards and assessments to improve student performance. (classroom observations, *Western Hills Middle School Article 31 Funding and Staff Development* binder, review of district documents, SALT Survey data 1998-99, conversations with teachers, School Improvement Plan)

Current grouping practices delineate three distinct ability groups in the four core subjects. This limits equal learning opportunities for all students. (classroom observations, meetings and conversations with students and teachers, following students)

A new teacher evaluation tool is being piloted this year. It is intended to be a positive, reflective process for both teachers and administrators. Teachers are evaluated using a competency based rubric which mirrors the assessment practices which teachers are beginning to implement in their own classrooms. (meetings with building and district administrators, Teacher Evaluation handbook)

The SALT Visiting Team Commends Western Hills Middle School for:

The effective use of Team Planning time

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that Western Hills Middle School:

Lower the student numbers in classrooms to allow for more diverse teaching methods and activities to meet the standards.

Continue to seek support from the district to lower class size and expand the school facilities to accommodate the growth in student population.

Expand substantially the teacher training in standards and offer it on an ongoing basis to enable teachers to develop the necessary tools to implement standards and assessments that will improve student performance.

Obtain an external facilitator to facilitate a broad-based strategic planning process that identifies and sets measurable goals.

Reevaluate the School Improvement Plan and consider the conclusions and recommendations in this report

before designing action plans.

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that the Cranston School District:

Continue to support the school's request for resources to lower class size and expand the school facilities to accommodate the growth in student population.

Design and implement more sustained, ongoing training for teachers in standards-based instruction.

Assist this school in finding an external resource for broad-based strategic planning.

The SALT Visiting Team Recommends that the Cranston City Council:

Provide the resources requested by the school and district necessary for Western Hills Middle School to lower class size and expand the school facilities to accommodate the growth in student population.

7. FINAL ADVICE TO THE SCHOOL

Western Hills Middle School has a unique opportunity for a new beginning. Teachers and administrators alike share a strong willingness to improve the teaching and learning in this school. To begin, it is vital that you build on the care, respect, and trust that is so apparent in the school to reach consensus on what a good middle school is. Without a shared vision you will not be able to move forward.

Begin by reflecting on your past and closely examining your present practice. Embrace the idea that all children can and should learn. Focus your school improvement plan. Tap the expertise of the teachers you already have in your midst who can show you the ways to move forward as you learn to implement standards-based instruction at Western Hills. Engage in sustained professional development to learn how to change your instruction so as to integrate high standards for all students.

Work to develop the realization among the entire community and district of the need for total support for growth in both the physical building and professional development in order to facilitate the educational process. Network with other middle schools and professional organizations for ongoing support and growth.

You already have much of what you need in place to ensure that the students at Western Hills Middle School are well-served by your efforts. By integrating the present strengths of your administration, the expertise that exists in your faculty, parental involvement, eager students, and the acceptance of new and innovative practices, Western Hills Middle School can truly become the "better" school it is striving to be.

APPENDIX

WESTERN HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

Dennis Charpentier, Teacher, Science 6
(Chair)

John Christy, Science Department Chair

John Mansella, Social Studies Department Chair

Catherine Disegna, English Department Chair

Charlene Haley, Mathematics Department Chair

Debra Siravo, Foreign Language Department Chair

Paul Gruczka, Guidance Department Chair

Jackie Fitzgerald, Special Education Department Chair

Mrs. Lane, Parent, PAB President

E. Roe, Teacher, Foreign Language

P. D'Aguanno, Teacher, Social Studies

Mrs. Greenaway, Parent

Jackie Ralston, Teacher, Social Studies 6

Cindy Grady, Teacher, Physical Education

Marc Garceau, Teacher, Music

Carl Gamba, Teacher, Technology

Dennis Neri, Teacher, English, Union President

Mrs. Resnick, Parent

Mr. Harootunian, Parent

Mrs. Burgess, Parent

Peter Nero, Principal

Anthony Lisa, Assistant Principal

THE SALT VISITING TEAM

Sandra L. Olson, English Language Arts teacher
Ponaganset Middle School, Foster-Glocester
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as a SALT Fellow)
Chair of the Team

Lucille Andolfo, Science teacher
Mt. Hope High School, Bristol-Warren

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

James Bedell, Science teacher
Toll Gate High School, Warwick

Raymond Birch, 5th grade teacher
Narragansett Pier School, Narragansett

Dr. Mary Canole, Director of Instruction and Grants
Newport School Department, Newport

Joann Carboni, English teacher
Westerly High School, Westerly

Sharyn Fuller, Business/Computers teacher
Bridgham Middle School, Providence

Richard Kelly, English Language Arts teacher
Gaudet Middle School, Middletown

Kathy Morrissette, Parent

Pawtucket

Marie Noble, 6th grade teacher
Davisville Middle School, North Kingstown

Larry Purtill, Social Studies teacher
Exeter-West Greenwich Junior/Senior High School
(on leave to serve as President, NEA Rhode Island)

Marty Sprague, Dance teacher
Roger Williams Middle School, Providence

Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

Western Hills Middle School

March 3, 2000

To complete the Catalpa Ltd. report endorsement, I have reviewed this report, observed a portion of the visit, and discussed the conduct of the full visit with the Visit Chair. Based on my knowledge derived from these sources of evidence, using the criteria specified in the *Endorsing SALT Visiting Team Reports by Catalpa Ltd.*, and using the methodology and procedures specified in the *SALT Visit Handbook –(3rd edition)*, I conclude that:

1. This report was produced by a legitimate SALT Visit that was led by a trained SALT Visit Chair and conducted in a manner that is consistent with SALT Visit procedures.
2. The conclusions and all other content of this report meet the criteria specified for a SALT Visit report.

Accordingly, Catalpa Ltd. endorses this report as a legitimate SALT Visit Report.



Thomas A. Wilson, EdD

CATALPA, LTD.

March 14, 2000