



Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
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FRANK E. THOMPSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

Newport, Rhode Island

SALT Visit Team Report

May 19, 2000



School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT)

The accountability program of the Rhode Island Department of Education

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FRANK E. THOMPSON MIDDLE SCHOOL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM *

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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 Frank E. Thompson Middle School from May 16-May 19, 2000, was to draw conclusions about the school in the three focus areas of SALT:

- Student Learning
- Teaching
- The School

The SALT visit to Frank E. Thompson Middle School was conducted during the same week that a SALT visit was conducted at these other Newport public schools: Cranston Calvert Elementary School, Carey Elementary School, and William J. Underwood Elementary School. As planned RIDE was also conducting its regular district School Support Visit (with a focus on special needs education) which includes visits to all Newport Schools.

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 at the end of the report.

The School Improvement Plan for Frank E. Thompson Middle School was the touchstone document for the team. 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 Frank E. Thompson Middle School.

The Visiting Team collected its evidence from the following:

- *a total of 93 classes were observed. Of these, 86 were full class observations. Most classrooms were visited at least once. Many teachers were observed more than once.*
- *many observations of the school (outside of classroom)*
- *following 9 students for a full day*
- *observation of common planning time meetings*
- *review of teacher schedules*
- *observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day*
- *scheduled meetings with the following groups:*
 - *School Improvement Team*
 - *School and district administrators*
 - *students*
 - *parents*
 - *Human Services Mall staff*
- *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, staff, and school administrators*
- *examination of student work, including a selection of work collected by the school*
- *analysis of achievement and equity gaps based on Information-works data*
- *review of district and school policies*
- *review of professional development activities*
- *review of classroom assessments.*
- *review of the following documents:*
 - *Thompson Middle School School Improvement Plan*
 - *Newport Public Schools Strategic Plan*
 - *SALT Survey 2000*
 - *InformationWorks! 1999*
 - *InformationWorks! 2000*
 - *1998, 1999 New Standards Reference Examination results*
 - *1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
 - *Newport Public Schools Teacher Evaluation Program*
 - *Contract between the Newport School Committee, City of Newport, Rhode Island, and the Teachers' Association of Newport, 1998-2001*

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, school and district administrators, and staff of the Human Services Mall. 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 Frank E. Thompson 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 Newport School Department, the citizens of Newport, and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility.

It is important to read and consider this report as a whole. Recommendations and commendations should be considered in context with the conclusions. That is the way they were written.

2. PROFILE OF FRANK E. THOMPSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

Frank E. Thompson Middle School serves students in grades six through eight in the city of Newport, Rhode Island, and is part of Newport's public school system. The Newport school system is administered by a superintendent plus a central administrative staff of seven. It is governed by an elected seven member school committee. All seven members run for two-year terms and all seven face re-election during the same election year.

Thompson Middle School is actually a complex of four connected buildings, the first of which was constructed in 1893, and the last of which was completed in 1978. The resulting complex is a three-story building that in fact includes at least nine different levels for students and staff to navigate. The structure is also a challenge to administer and has deteriorated a great deal over the years. After failing to pass bond issues in 1972 and 1997, the voters of Newport did pass a bond of over \$19 million in 1999. At the close of school in June of 2000, the students and staff of Thompson will vacate the premises for two years while extensive demolition, renovations, and new construction take place.

One principal, one assistant principal, one dean, 65 full and part-time teachers, 10 teacher aides, 22 support staff, and a staff of more than five in the Human Services Mall, serve the 655 students of Thompson.

Sixty-five percent of Thompson's students are white, 20 percent are black, 11.3 percent are Hispanic, 2.5 percent are Native American, and 1.3 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. Forty-six percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, twenty-four percent receive special education services, and 18 of Thompson's students are designated as ESL learners. Twelve of Thompson's students who are unable to succeed in a traditional school environment attend the Newport Alternate School, which is located off-site.

Many support services are provided to Thompson Middle School students through the Human Services Mall located within the school. Sponsored by the Newport Partnership for Families through a \$50,000 grant from Newport Hospital, the mall offers students counseling, mentoring, and a variety of programs designed to help them succeed. Other programs available to students include a partnership with Stop Over Services of Newport County, connections with Salve Regina University through Project Link and with Roger Williams University through Project Better Way, and a tutoring program through VINE (Volunteers in Newport Education). Thompson's many initiatives also include KITES, the Accelerated Reader Program, the Times2 program, and the Robert Potter League for Animals Partnership.

3. PORTRAIT OF FRANK E. THOMPSON MIDDLE SCHOOL AT THE TIME

OF THE VISIT

Frank E. Thompson Middle School's strength lies in its sense of community. Even during the upheaval and uncertainty of relocating for the next two years, teachers and administrators maintain a safe and caring atmosphere for their increasingly diverse population of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Students respect their teachers and demonstrate friendliness towards each other. Teachers are nurturing and reach out to their students in a variety of ways. The Human Services Mall provides a centrally located area of services that support students socially, emotionally, and academically.

A few teachers stand out at Thompson. They successfully engage their students in meaningful and challenging standards-based learning experiences. They hold high expectations for all of their students. Far too many teachers, however, do not challenge their students to strive for excellence and to achieve high standards. Their expectations for student performance vary from class to class and cluster to cluster and often remain unclear to students. For most students, knowing what is expected, "depends on the teacher." Grouping practices and the lack of clear expectations have created unequal learning opportunities for students. Too often teachers depend on whole class teacher directed instruction, over-using worksheets, factual recall, and drill and practice exercises. They give students little responsibility for their own learning.

Thompson Middle School lacks a clear direction and focus in some areas. While teachers are encouraged to participate in professional development activities, the administration is not consistent in its effort to charge all teachers with the responsibility to embrace opportunities for improved instructional practice. For many teachers the voluntary participation in professional development activities is not sustained nor on-going. The schedule includes an excessive waste of instructional time especially during period seven. The School Improvement Plan lacks specificity and clear target dates, making assessment of progress difficult. Academic improvement initiatives are sometimes abandoned before they can be fully implemented throughout the school.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- *InformationWorks! 2000-1999 results*
- *1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*

Conclusions

Seventy-one percent of Thompson students achieve or exceed the standard on the *Mathematics Skills* subtest, 21 percent achieve or exceed the standard on the *Mathematics Concepts* subtest, and 30 percent achieve or exceed the standard on the *Mathematics Problem Solving* subtest of the New Standards Reference Examination. (*Informationworks!2000*)

Fifty-six percent of students achieve or exceed the standard on the *Reading Basic Understanding* subtest of the New Standards Reference Examination. Twenty-seven percent achieve or exceed the standard on the *Reading Analysis and Interpretation* subtest. Thirty-eight percent achieve or exceed the standard on the *Writing Effectiveness* subtest, and 57 percent achieve the standard on the *Writing Conventions* subtest of the same examination. (*Informationworks! 2000*)

Twenty-two percent of seventh grade students achieve or exceed the standard on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment. (*1999 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*)

Equity gaps (a difference of fifteen percent or greater) exist between white students and other ethnic groups in three out of four of the subtests measured with white students outscoring most other ethnic groups. A notable exception exists on the *Reading Analysis and Interpretation* subtest in which Hispanic students score about the same as white students. (*Informationworks! 2000*)

Equity gaps exist between special education students and general education students on all four of the subtests measured with general education students outperforming special education students. (*Informationworks!2000*)

Recommendations for Frank E. Thompson Middle School:

Examine all of your equity gaps in order to develop and implement strategies and programs that will enable all students to achieve high standards.

Examine your math, English language arts, and seventh grade Rhode Island Writing Assessment results. Revise the School Improvement Plan in order to include specific strategies that will raise performance.

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- *classroom observations*
- *conversations with teachers*
- *following students*
- *meetings with students and parents*
- *SALT Survey 2000*
- *Examination of student work*

Conclusions

Within clusters, across grades, and throughout the school, teachers lack consistent expectations for student performance and do not make clear to students what is expected of them. This results in students' educational experience being limited by the class in which they are enrolled. (*classroom observations, following students, meetings with students and parents, examination of student work, conversations with teachers, SALT Survey 2000*)

Teachers too often rely on whole class instruction. They lecture with limited discussion, employ factual recall worksheets, and assign monotonous tasks. This teacher-centered instruction does not take advantage of students' various learning styles and minimizes opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning. (*classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, meetings with students and parents*)

A few teachers exemplify the best of what teaching can be. They implement standards-based instruction and actively engage their students in meaningful learning experiences such as cooperative learning groups, problem solving, real life applications, and authentic assessments. (*classroom observations, following students, meetings with students and parents, SALT Survey 2000*)

Many teachers make inefficient use of available instructional time. They allow routine tasks such as housekeeping activities, addressing student behaviors, and re-establishing classroom practices to erode the amount of time spent on instruction. Because the classroom is so teacher directed, students spend valuable class time waiting to be told what to do next. (*classroom observations, following students*)

In response to the district's commitment, a few teachers at Thompson have embraced standards-based instruction. A larger number of teachers are in the beginning stages of implementation, while many others have yet to begin. This results in unequal learning opportunities for students. (*classroom observations, following students, conversations with teachers, SALT Survey 2000, meeting with students*)

Commendations for Frank E. Thompson Middle School:

Those teachers who exemplify the best of what teaching can be.

Recommendations for Frank E. Thompson Middle School:

Participate in professional development around standards-based instruction. Implement that training in all classrooms.

Participate in professional development in different models of instruction.

Recommendations for the Newport School District:

Provide the leadership and support to ensure the implementation of standards-based instruction at Thompson Middle School.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- *classroom observations*
- *conversations with teachers*
- *review of teacher schedules*
- *meetings with School Improvement Team, school and district administrators, students, parents, School Support Services review team, and Human Services Mall staff*
- *observation of common planning time meetings*
- *following students*
- *Thompson Middle School School Improvement Plan 1999-2001*
- *Newport Public Schools Teacher Evaluation Program*
- *Newport Public Schools Strategic Plan*
- *Contract between the Newport School Committee, City of Newport, Rhode Island, and the Teachers' Association of Newport, 1998-2001*

Conclusions

Professional development at Thompson is not universally recognized as a priority because participation is voluntary. The school administration does not take advantage of contractually allotted time to provide ongoing, sustained professional development, and teachers do not always take advantage of opportunities to further their professional development. (*meetings with school and district administrators, Contract between the Newport School Committee, City of Newport, Rhode Island, and the Teachers' Association of Newport, 1998-2001, conversations with teachers*)

Many students at Thompson Middle School fall through the cracks because their individual needs are not being met. The grouping within clusters, the unsuccessful inclusion of special needs students in some academic classes, and the limited options for enrichment, restrict the learning opportunities that are made available to students. (*classroom observations, conversations with teachers, observation of common planning time meetings, meetings with students, parents, and School Support Services review team*)

Thompson provides an invaluable range of support services for all its students. The outside agencies available through the Human Services Mall as well as the behavior management specialist and the crisis management specialist ensure that students can remain in school and be successful socially, emotionally, and academically. (*following students, meetings with school administrators, parents, School Support Services review team, and Human Services Mall staff*)

The School Improvement Plan lacks specific and measurable results for student performance. It focuses on literacy and mathematics, neglecting other school-wide issues such as improving student proficiency in technology and student attendance. It does not state the specific numbers of students who will attain proficiency, nor when they would be expected to do so. Without the inclusion of these areas in their plan, Thompson cannot assess the effectiveness of their school improvement efforts. (*Thompson Middle School School Improvement Plan 1999-2001, Newport Public Schools Strategic Plan, meeting with School Improvement Team*)

The schedule at Thompson Middle School includes an excessive waste of instructional time especially during period seven. For many students, on some days less than half of their day is spent in core academic classes. The use of period seven for pullout activities has left a majority of students with a study period void of academic enrichment and/or instruction. (*classroom observations, following students, meetings with district administrators, students, and School Support Services review team, review of teacher schedules*)

The pilot teacher evaluation tool for Thompson Middle School, which is based on Rhode Island New Teacher Standards 1998, has the potential for building the capacity of the staff to "assure a high quality of teacher performance and to advance the instructional programs of the Newport Public Schools." (*Newport Public Schools Teacher Evaluation Program, meeting with school administrators, conversations with teachers*)

Commendations for Frank E. Thompson Middle School:

The invaluable range of support services for all students

Recommendations for Frank E. Thompson Middle School:

Utilize contractually allotted time for on-going, sustained professional development.

Revise the Frank E. Thompson Middle School School Improvement Plan to fully address and detail all areas of need within the school.

Re-evaluate and revise grouping within clusters, the inclusion of special needs students in academic classes, and options for enrichment in order to meet the needs of all students.

Change the schedule to increase instructional time and eliminate unstructured time.

Recommendations for the Newport School District:

Provide on-going, sustained professional development opportunities utilizing contractually allotted time.

Provide support to the Thompson School Improvement Team that will guide the revision of their School Improvement Plan.

7. FINAL ADVICE TO THE SCHOOL

The Thompson Middle School community faces a formidable challenge as they move from the building to four different sites for the next two years. At the same time they have been offered a wonderful opportunity. This transition time cannot be wasted. While housed in those different places, teachers must capitalize on their class and cluster organization, develop flexible time blocks that become lively centers for active learning, and build strong communities of engaged learners.

A few teachers have infused standards-based instruction successfully into their classrooms, but too few. Thompson teachers must participate in sustained and on-going professional development that will enable them to ensure that their students become high performers. In order to meet the needs of all their diverse learners, teachers must also learn how to differentiate instruction.

The current School Improvement Plan is narrow in scope and lacks specificity. Thompson must develop a clear and comprehensive improvement plan that will enable students to achieve competency in all areas so that they can be successful when they leave this school. Once that plan is complete, it should be implemented fully.

Frank E. Thompson Middle School will undergo much needed changes during the next two years while students and teachers fan across the city in small pockets of learning. It will be a difficult time for everyone, but well worth the effort. Thompson will have to work hard at maintaining its identity, but the school community will continue because as a student has said, "Thompson is not a building; it is people. No matter where they put us, we are still Thompson."

APPENDIX

FRANK E. THOMPSON MIDDLE SCHOOL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

James Caswell, principal
chair

Kathy Almanzor, parent

Michael Browner, grade 7
social studies studies teacher

Hugo DeAscentis, parent
school committee member

Suzanne Dunbar, grade 6
science teacher

Mary Jerome, grade 8
math teacher/grade leader

Nicole O'Reilly, grade 8
special education teacher

Lisa Olaynack, grade 7
special education teacher

Jane Regan, assistant principal

Chris Reidy, parent
director, Newport County Mental Health

Diane Smyth, special education aide
parent

Ed Stiess, parent

Laurie Sullivan, grade 8
English language arts teacher

THE SALT VISITING TEAM

Sandra L. Olson, ELA teacher, team leader
Ponaganset Middle School, Foster-Glocester
(on leave to Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as a SALT fellow)
chair of the team

Mary Chemel, parent
Cranston, Rhode Island

Joan Fagnoli, assistant principal
North Cumberland Middle School
Cumberland, Rhode Island

Valarie Lawson, social studies teacher
Martin Middle School
East Providence, Rhode Island

John Maxson, special education teacher
Babcock Middle School
Westerly, Rhode Island

George McDonough, office of integrated social services
Rhode Island Department of Education
Providence, Rhode Island

Sara Oliveira, technology coordinator
Portsmouth Middle School
Portsmouth, Rhode Island

Kerrylin Reagan, science teacher
Bridgham Middle School
Providence, Rhode Island

Thelma Rocha, RIPIN parent facilitator

Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

Frank E. Thompson Middle School

May 19, 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.

The one incident of a team member breaching the Code of Conduct was well managed and did not have any material effect on the quality of this report.



Thomas A. Wilson, EdD

CATALPA, LTD.

June 12, 2000