



Thornton Elementary School

Johnston

SALT Visit Team Report

October 6, 2000



School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT)

The accountability program of the Rhode Island Department of Education

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This report is available at www.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt

1. THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS
2. PROFILE OF THORNTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
3. PORTRAIT OF Thornton Elementary School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT
4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

Conclusions

Recommendations for Thornton Elementary School:

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

Conclusions

Commendations for Thornton Elementary School:

Recommendations for Thornton Elementary School:

Recommendations for the Johnston School District:

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

Conclusions

Recommendations for Thornton Elementary School:

Recommendations for the Johnston School District:

7. Final Advice to the School

THORNTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

THE SALT VISITING TEAM

New Standards Reference Examination and RI Writing Assessment Results (2000)

Catalpa Ltd. Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

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 Thornton Elementary School from October 3-6, 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 at the end of the report.

The school improvement plan for Thornton Elementary 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, 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 Thornton Elementary School.

The visiting team collected its evidence from the following:

Classroom observations which totaled 88 full classroom observations and 78 partial classroom observations. All classrooms were visited at least once. Almost every teacher was observed more than once.

many observations of the school (outside of classroom)

following 8 students for a full day

observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day

scheduled meetings with the following groups:

- *Thornton Elementary School Improvement Team*

- *school and district administrators*
- *students*
- *parents*

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:

- *Thornton Elementary School Improvement Plan*
- *1999-2000 SALT Survey report*
- *1998 InformationWorks!*
- *1999 InformationWorks!*
- *2000 InformationWorks!*
- *2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*
- *1998, 1999, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
- *Johnston Public Schools Teacher Evaluation Form*
- *Contractual Agreement Between the Johnston School Committee and the Johnston Federation of Teachers*

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 22 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 Thornton 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 Johnston, 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 THORNTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Thornton Elementary School is the largest of the six elementary schools that serve students in grades one through five in the Johnston school system in Johnston, Rhode Island. Students from Thornton feed into Ferri Middle School, the town's middle school. The school system is administered by a superintendent and a district staff of five. It is governed by an elected school committee that includes a chairperson and four committee *members, each of whom represents a district within the town.*

The red brick building that houses Thornton Elementary School is 79 years old. It was built on the site of the original structure which had burned to the ground. To alleviate overcrowding in the building two modular classroom units have been added, one in 1995 and the second in 1997.

As of this Fall all of the pre-kindergarten special needs students and the kindergarten students in Johnston have been relocated to the new Early Childhood Center. Another change for Thornton this year is the appointment of a new principal. She is the single administrator in the building.

Twenty-four fulltime teachers, four part time teachers, one fulltime nurse, one part time guidance counselor, 10 teacher assistants and aides, five full and part time support staff, one secretary, and two custodians serve the 314 students at Thornton Elementary School.

The student population is 99 percent white with one percent consisting of black, Asian, and Hispanic students. Thirty percent of Thornton's students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and in the 1996-97 school year a breakfast program was instituted in the school. Twenty percent of the students receive special education services.

The awarding of a Reading Excellence Grant last year and this, as well as the awarding of an I Read Grant this year, have allowed Thornton Elementary School to implement several programs to raise the level of student reading. Reading Recovery is another integral part of Thornton's reading initiatives. Champlin and Working Wonders grants have provided the school with 30 computers in a lab as well as a two-computer workstation in the classroom. This year two teachers from Thornton participated in the Rhode Island Teachers in Technology School Leadership and Model Classroom Initiative and have brought back computers, television monitors and an LCD projector to the school. The school also has a business partner in education with Citizens Bank. Through this partnership the bank provides various resources to the school.

Thornton Elementary School's student performance on the Rhode Island state assessments includes gaps to standard as well as equity gaps. Student scores in the Reading Analysis and Interpretation and the Writing Conventions subtests show steady declines over the past three years while scores on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment show a slow, but constant, increase. The 2000 New Standards Reference Examination and the 2000 Rhode Island Writing test scores are attached to this report. To obtain more information on student achievement and equity gaps and other statistical information about Thornton Elementary School, refer to *InformationWorks!* at www.infoworks.ride.uri.edu.

3. PORTRAIT OF Thornton Elementary School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Thornton Elementary School is a school community with good intentions, but in need of support and guidance. Teachers work hard for their students. Students love their teachers and overall feel comfortable and safe at school. Parents show a desire and effort to be involved with this school. However, many teachers do not use the strategies necessary to guide their students to improved learning, nor do they have high expectations for their students. Far too many students have learning needs that are not being met. The physical plant is antiquated, crowded, and restricts the flexibility of the work of this school in learning.

While Thornton has made the commitment to become a standards based school, teachers have only just begun to fully understand and implement them. A few teachers have successfully embedded their classrooms with a standards based culture, but most teachers have not. Many classrooms are teacher centered, not student centered, and many teachers depend on whole group instruction. They do not employ a variety of instructional strategies that would meet their students' individual learning needs and thus enable them to achieve high standards.

The schoolwide focus on student reading has led to commendable professional development for teachers that will help to improve student reading. A few Thornton teachers model effective, student centered strategies that have helped teachers in their professional development, but such experiences are not enough.

The physical plant is woefully inadequate. It has been poorly maintained by the district and is run down. Some students attend classes in basement rooms not designed to be classrooms. These classrooms have poor ventilation and lighting.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

1999 Information Works!

2000 Information Works!

2000 New Standards Reference Examination results

examination of student work

classroom observations

following students

conversations with students

1999-2000 SALT Survey

Conclusions

There is a significant equity gap between general education and special education students in the Mathematical Skills subtest of the New Standards Reference Examination. These results are puzzling. (2000 Information Works!, *classroom observations, following students*)

While Thornton student performance has dramatically improved in the Writing Effectiveness subtest of the New Standards Reference Examination in the past year, their performance on the Conventions subtest of the same examination has plummeted to the point where only 6 percent of the students achieve the standard. Often student work reflects inconsistent application of writing conventions. (2000 New Standards Reference Examination results, 2000 Information Works!, *examination of student work, classroom observations, following students*)

Student performance on the Reading Analysis and Interpretation subtest of the New Standards Reference Examination has declined for each of the past two years. In some classes student responses to reading tend to be factual in nature with students not sufficiently engaged in learning higher order thinking skills. (2000 New Standards Reference Examination results, 1999 and 2000 Information Works!, *examination of student work, classroom observations, following students*)

Subtests of the Mathematics New Standards Reference Examination show a lack of growth over the past two years. In fact, Skills and Concepts have decreased and Problem Solving has remained static. This is troubling. (2000 New Standards Reference Examination results, 1999 and 2000 Information Works!)

In some classrooms students are truly engaged and demonstrate a level of energy and excitement. Many students exhibit a level of compliance and some degree of comfort. However, too many students are not active participants. They walk around the room, rest their heads on their desks, tap pencils, talk to each other during lessons, draw, and daydream. Unengaged students do not learn. (*following students, classroom*)

observations, conversations with students, 1999-2000 SALT Survey)

Recommendations for Thornton Elementary School:

Examine the 2000 state assessment results to inform the school improvement plan.

Develop and implement strategies to close the gaps in student learning.

Make every effort to engage all students in their learning.

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

classroom observations

conversations and interviews with teachers

following students

meetings with Thornton Elementary School Improvement Team, school and district administrators

2000 Information Works!

2000 New Standards Reference Examination results

1999-2000 SALT Survey

examination of student work

Thornton Elementary School Improvement Plan

Conclusions

Teachers at Thornton Elementary School demonstrate various levels of understanding and implementation of standards based instruction. While the majority of teachers have participated in training in standards based instruction, only a few actively engage their students in effective learning activities embedded with standards. This results in unequal opportunities for student learning. (*following students, classroom observations, meetings with school and district administrators, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Thornton teachers have made efforts to improve reading instruction. Some teachers have implemented a four-block language arts program, others use literature circles, D.E.A.R. time, guided reading, and leveled books to differentiate instruction for all learners. Both teachers and students are supported in their efforts with Reading Recovery, modeled lessons, and small group instruction. These are wonderful steps which should improve reading. (*following students, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Some teachers have made considerable efforts to improve student writing. However, language arts instruction often does not include writing or instruction in the processes of writing. For example, student editing and revising are used only in some classrooms. This might explain the significant drop in student scores on the Writing Conventions subtest. (*following students, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with teachers, examination of student work, 2000 Information Works!, 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results, meeting with school administrators, 1999-2000 SALT Survey*)

Teachers are beginning to use rubrics to evaluate student work. This use of rubrics is creating clearer task expectations for students. This is a good first step for setting high expectations. (*following students, classroom observations, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Most instruction at Thornton Elementary School is teacher centered rather than student centered. Many teachers depend too much on whole group instruction without differentiating tasks or allowing student choice to accommodate individual learning needs. These practices may explain the limited student engagement in some classes. *(following students, classroom observations, Thornton Elementary School Improvement Plan, 1999-2000 SALT Survey)*

Some teachers lack sufficient background knowledge in the use of curricular materials to effectively implement programs currently in place. A lack of clear instructional guides impedes teacher ability to make informed instructional decisions. This often results in classroom assignments which are not designed to challenge all students. Many learning activities only require students to recall factual information rather than apply and analyze it. *(following students, classroom observations, Thornton Elementary School Improvement Plan, conversations and interviews with teachers, meeting with Thornton Elementary School Improvement Team, 1999-2000 SALT Survey)*

Although teachers have the materials to implement the current math program, they are not comfortable using them. The program is not effectively used within grades and across grade levels. This results in gaps in student learning and may contribute to the lack of growth in student performance on state assessments. *(following students, classroom observations, 1999-2000 SALT Survey, conversations and interviews with teachers)*

A few classroom and specialist teachers at Thornton Elementary School model excellence in their practice. They have high expectations for their students and themselves and promote a culture of learners. *(following students, classroom observations, examination of student work)*

Commendations for Thornton Elementary School:

The wonderful steps being taken in reading instruction that include a four-block language arts program, literature circles, D.E.A.R. time, guided reading, and leveled books

The classroom and specialist teachers who model excellence in their practice.

Recommendations for Thornton Elementary School:

Participate in more standards based training. Additionally, use the expertise within your school to model effective learning activities embedded with standards. Implement those skills and strategies into your instruction.

Expand efforts to improve reading instruction throughout the school.

Include daily writing instruction for a variety of purposes and across curricula for all students.

Through professional development acquire the skills and strategies necessary to improve instruction in all content areas. Implement those skills and strategies in daily practice.

Use those teachers who model excellence in their practice to mentor within the school.

Examine assessment practices to guide instruction.

Recommendations for the Johnston School District:

Provide the time and resources necessary for Thornton Elementary School teachers to participate in the professional development opportunities recommended in this report.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

classroom observations

observations of the school

conversations and interviews with teachers

meetings with Thornton Elementary School Improvement Team, school and district administrators, parents

following students

Thornton Elementary School Improvement Plan

school map

examination of teachers' schedules

observations of the library

Johnston Public School Teacher Evaluation Form

Contractual Agreement Between the Johnston School Committee and the Johnston Federation of Teachers

Conclusions

The Thornton School facility is clearly substandard with the lack of a gymnasium, an inadequate library, student bathrooms located in the basement, temporary modular classrooms, and basement areas used for instruction. Two special education classrooms, located in the basement, have poor ventilation, exposed pipes and wires, excessive dampness, and are overcrowded. An offensive, skunk-like odor permeates many areas of the building. The deplorable condition of the building is not conducive to teaching and learning. (*following students, observations of the school, school map, meetings with district administrators and parents*)

The teacher evaluation tool is inadequate and provides for limited feedback to improve instruction and learning. The length and frequency of observations are minimal. (*Johnston Public School Teacher Evaluation Form, Contractual Agreement between the Johnston School Committee and the Johnston Federation of Teachers, conversations and interviews with teachers, meetings with school and district administrators*)

The Thornton Elementary School has devised a school improvement plan grounded in a self study. While the plan limits its objectives to student state assessment results, the four tactics in the plan do outline other areas for school improvement. (*Thornton Elementary School Improvement Plan, meetings with school administrators and Thornton Elementary School Improvement Team*)

This school lacks sufficient resources to provide quality learning opportunities for all students. Art, music, physical education, and library instruction are provided only every other week. This prohibits the continuity and integration of instruction. The school library is woefully inadequate and unavailable. The number of books to support the school's acknowledged focus on literacy is a major concern. A library that is locked for six-and-one-half days out of ten severely limits student access to literature. The current practice of hiring interns, rather than fulltime certified staff, negatively impacts the school's ability to offer students a comprehensive program of instruction. Additionally, a part time guidance counselor is unable to adequately support the varied needs of students in this school. *(following students, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with teachers, examination of teacher schedules, meetings with Thornton Elementary School Improvement Team and parents, observations of the library)*

The current schedule reflects a fragmented and short instructional day. Students do not spend enough time on task because of the number of transitions built into the schedule for lunch, recesses, lavatory breaks, and dismissal. This limits student opportunities for learning. *(examination of teachers' schedules, following students, classroom observations, meeting with school and district administrators)*

Recommendations for Thornton Elementary School:

- Use this report to further refine your school improvement plan.
- Look in to ways to make the school library available to students every day.
- Increase time on task by reviewing and revising the school schedule.

Recommendations for the Johnston School District:

- Make use of the district facilities study to bring the building up to standard and make better use of space.
- Explore ways to provide Thornton with weekly programs in art, music, library media, and physical education.
- Provide Thornton with a fulltime guidance counselor.
- Increase the budget to purchase books and resources for the library.
- Develop a comprehensive teacher evaluation tool that emphasizes professional growth.
- Provide Thornton Elementary School with the resources necessary to review and revise the school schedule in order to increase time on task.

7. Final Advice to the School

You have started the hard work to become a community of learners. The effective strategies you are implementing to improve student reading should not only continue, but be expanded. In fact, daily reading and writing instruction need to be a strong focus of your efforts if all of your students are to develop competent reading and writing skills.

Use the conclusions and recommendations in this report to refine your school improvement plan. As part of that plan, develop concrete, systematic strategies for ongoing professional development that include effective instruction and assessment, professional development that will enable teachers to engage all of their students in learning. Include all of your teachers in these opportunities that will lead to improved student learning. Work with all teachers so that the strategies and skills they learn are implemented in their daily practice.

You already have teachers at Thornton who model excellence in their practice. Use them. They are an excellent and readily available resource that can easily go untapped.

Enlist support from the Johnston school district and your community to improve Thornton Elementary School's facilities so that all students, teachers, and staff here work and learn in pleasant, healthy surroundings. Work with the district to increase the resources you need to move this school forward in its work.

THORNTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

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Principal

Kelley A. Cerbo
Grade 5 teacher

Carolyn Cianci
Special education teacher assistant

Richard J. DelFino, Jr.
School committee

Lisa P. Filippelli
Grade 1 teacher

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Grade 5 teacher

Colleen A. Muller
Resource teacher

Marcia Neumann
Grade 2 teacher

Debi Rainone
Parent

Bonnie L. Renfrew
Grade 3, special education/self-contained

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THE SALT VISITING TEAM

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New Standards Reference Examination and RI Writing Assessment Results (2000)

Catalpa Ltd. Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

Thornton Elementary School

October 6, 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 Visit team Reports by Catalpa Ltd.*, and using the methodology and procedures specified in the *Handbook for SALT Visit Chairs, 1st 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.
October 23, 2000