



North Cumberland Middle School

Cumberland

SALT Visit Team Report

November 17, 2000



School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT)

The accountability program of the Rhode Island Department of Education

Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education

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

1. THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS
2. PROFILE OF North Cumberland Middle School
3. PORTRAIT OF North Cumberland Middle School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT
4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

Conclusions

Commendations for North Cumberland Middle School

Recommendations for North Cumberland Middle School

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

Conclusions

Commendations for North Cumberland Middle School

Recommendations for North Cumberland Middle School

Recommendations for the Cumberland School District

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

Conclusions

Commendations for North Cumberland Middle School

Recommendations for North Cumberland Middle School

Recommendations for Cumberland School District

7. Final Advice to the School

NORTH CUMBERLAND MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

THE SALT VISIT 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 North Cumberland Middle School from November 14, 2000 through November 17, 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 visit team. The visit 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 North Cumberland 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 North Cumberland Middle School.

The visit team collected its evidence from the following:

- ◆ *a total of 118 full and partial classroom observations which totaled over 85 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 nine students for a full day*
- ◆ *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*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, staff, parents, and school administrators*
- ◆ *examination of student work, including a selection of work collected by the school*
- ◆ *examination of school documents*
- ◆ *analyses 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 teacher curriculum/standards guides*
- ◆ *review of subject curriculum guides*
- ◆ *review of the following documents:*
 - *NCMS School Improvement Plan*
 - *Analysis of Data from the SALT Survey at NCMS*
 - *NCMS: Strengths and Weaknesses document*
 - *NCMS: From the Principal's Pen*
 - *District Strategic Plan*
 - *District Professional Development Plan*
 - *Cumberland Teacher Contract*
 - *NCMS Teacher Evaluation tool*
 - *Cumberland School Department Expenditure Guideline*

- *1999-2000 SALT Survey report*
- *1997 Information Works!*
- *1998 Information Works!*
- *1999 Information Works!*
- *2000 Information Works!*
- *1998, 1999, 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*
- *1999, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*

The full Team has built the conclusions, commendations and recommendations presented here through intense and thorough discussions. The visit team met for a total of 25 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 North Cumberland 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 School Department, the citizens of Cumberland, 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 North Cumberland Middle School

North Cumberland Middle School serves students in grades 6-8 in the suburban community of Cumberland, Rhode Island and is part of the Cumberland School System. A seven-member school committee, whose members are elected, governs the Cumberland Public School District. A superintendent, an assistant superintendent and a business manager administer the school system.

The present school first opened its doors to students in 1971. To accommodate an increase in student enrollment, an addition was constructed in 1994. It is the newest educational facility in Cumberland.

North Cumberland Middle School students are served by a professional staff of two administrators, two guidance counselors, 51 full and part-time veteran faculty, one school nurse/teacher, one office administrative assistant, several teaching assistants and aides, and five custodians. The school is organized around a teaming structure with each grade level having two teams.

Of the 682 students attending North Cumberland Middle School 98 % are White, 1 percent are Hispanic, 1 % are Asian / Pacific Islander, less than .5% are Black, and 0 % are Native American. One hundred and nine students totaling 16 % receive special education services and 5 % are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

The school has been successful in securing funding from the Champlin Foundation, Working Wonders, the Rhode Island Foundation, the Orion Society, The Rhode Island Historical Society, the State Reading Association and the National Science Foundation. With this funding, the North Cumberland teachers have been able to introduce some distinctive programs such as the Model Classroom Initiative, "History in Our Backyard" and the "Great Guppy Adventure".

North Cumberland Middle School student performance on the New Standards Reference Examination show little change between 1997 and 2000 in the Mathematics Skills and Mathematics Concepts subtests, and a steady increase in the Problem Solving subtests (29%-45%). All other subtests on the New Standards Reference Examination show a decline in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard between 1998 and 2000. The declines in percentages are as follows: Reading, Basic Understanding (79%-69%); Reading, Analysis and Interpretation (56%-37%); Writing, Effectiveness (91%-56%); Writing, Conventions (92%-68%).

In the 1999 and 2000 Information Works! data analyses, the percentage of North Cumberland Middle School students meeting or exceeding the standard on the various subtests is declining as compared with the performance of similar students statewide.

Seventh grade student performance on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment scores have improved between the 1998 and 2000 school years. The percent of students achieving the standard was 27% in 1998 and 48% in 2000.

Equity gaps (a difference of more than 15%) exist between general education and special education students on all four subtests of the New Standards Reference Examinations with general education outperforming special education students. Equity gaps also exist between male and female students on the English Language Arts Reading Analysis and Interpretation and Writing Effectiveness subtests with females outperforming males.

The team used the test score information found in *Information Works!* and the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam School Summaries to determine the performance and equity gaps discussed in the student learning conclusions. 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results have been appended to this report. *Information Works!* data for North Cumberland Middle School is available at www.ridoe.net.

3. PORTRAIT OF North Cumberland Middle School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

North Cumberland Middle School is a bright, colorful, clean building with a very welcoming entrance and stairway. The general atmosphere is open, airy and pleasant. However, upon further inspection, one realizes that the school population is increasing and the building is bursting at the seams. The building is filled to capacity. All classroom space is utilized. The school population is expected to rise in the coming years. However, there is no plan in place for future expansion of the facility nor is a plan forthcoming. The physical layout of the building is not conducive to teaming. Some team members are separated from one another. There are few areas for whole team activities.

Students busily move through the crowded hallways in an orderly fashion. They are very polite and display mature, respectful behavior. Once in the classrooms, students know what is expected of them, adhere to the rules, and are ready to learn. Because of the various instructional techniques employed by many teachers, students are engaged, relish the moment, and delve fully into the subject matter. Teachers are teaching well and students are invested in their learning for the most part.

The North Cumberland Middle School faculty is made up of a veteran staff of concerned teachers full of pride in their work. It is obvious that teachers enjoy working together and some are involved in extracurricular activities. Some teachers are moving toward implementing standard-based instruction and problem-based projects. Others have already done so.

Collegiality between and among teachers and administrators is evident. Teachers view the school administrators as supportive, caring, and fair. There seems to be a high level of trust exhibited among peers. The counselors show a willingness to be involved, but are so understaffed that most of their dealings with students are primarily reactionary.

Some classrooms display a plethora of student-produced material; other classrooms do not. Most students are learning and engaged, especially in classes that are interactive and use hands-on activities. A majority of classes observed are innovative and exciting. Some teams utilize interdisciplinary units, while some seventh and eighth grade teams demonstrate little evidence of team planning and collaboration.

Student placement and scheduling is a matter of concern. The practice of tracking students reduces flexibility in scheduling. It rarely allows students to be properly placed in all subject areas. Tracking also appears to have a negative effect on a student's self-image. Students perceive tracking as a "caste system" which causes them to feel academically inferior. Some teachers acknowledge that there should be movement allowed for multi-tracking to accommodate student ability in different subject areas. Unfortunately, many of the staff view homogeneous grouping as one of the school's strengths rather than a weakness.

The School Improvement Plan does not have all the necessary components for full implementation of school wide reform. Although Tactics and a timeline are delineated, there are no guidelines for implementing the Action Steps, Responsibility, and Cost/Benefit analyses in the Plan. There is no formal school-based Professional Development Plan in place.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *2000 Information Works!*
- ◆ *2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
- ◆ *2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*
- ◆ *examination of student work*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with students*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with teachers*

Conclusions

Many students are stimulated, excited and actively involved in their learning. Engaging activities include role-playing, brainstorming, labs, oral presentations, problem solving, cooperative learning, and researching. It is evident that they are learning well by their ability to simulate real world experiences and connect concepts to practical applications. However, there are small pockets of students who are passive participants. Evidence of this includes off task behavior such as daydreaming, simple regurgitation of previously presented information, and lack of participation. They are not learning. (*classroom observations, conversations and interviews with students, student work*)

Students demonstrate some competency in problem solving skills using manipulatives (such as tessellation tiles), graphically represented data from experiments, estimation to interpret data, and the gathering of evidence to formulate predictions. This coincides with the steady increase in problem solving scores from 29% in 1997 to 45% in 2000. (*New Standards Reference Exam results, classroom observations, student work*)

Many students are reading various types of literature in scheduled Reading classes and English Language Arts classes. They show reading competency through analytical responses, making predictions, creating interpretations, and drawing conclusions. However, in classes across the curriculum, a very limited amount of learning to improve higher order reading skills was observed. This is evidenced by a decline in the performance on the Reading subtests of Basic Understanding (79%-69%) and Analysis and Interpretation (56%-37%) over a three year period from 1998 to 2000. (*classroom observations, conversations and interviews with students and teachers, New Standards Reference Exam results*)

Students are writing in numerous ways, primarily in English Language Arts and Reading classes. Effective writing is also occurring in some other classes, including Science, Social Studies, Foreign Language and Math. Poetry writing, webbing, persuasive, narrative and responsive compositions, analyzing, synthesizing and drawing conclusions in lab reports demonstrate student knowledge of effective writing. Despite student participation in

these writing activities, students are not exhibiting improvement in their writing skill assessments. The New Standards Reference Exam Writing subtests of Effectiveness and Conventions sharply declined from 91% to 56% and 92% to 68% respectively from 1998 to 2000. (*classroom observations, student work, New Standards Reference Exam results*)

Commendations for North Cumberland Middle School

Enthusiastic, respectful and eager learners

Recommendations for North Cumberland Middle School:

Develop and improve reading skills across the curriculum

Develop strategies to engage all students in active learning

Increase writing instruction across the curriculum.

Explore the implementation of a supplemental reading program

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *observations of the school*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, staff and school administrators*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *scheduled meeting with school and district administrators*
- ◆ 1999 Information Works!
- ◆ 2000 Information Works!
- ◆ *SALT Survey 1999*

Conclusions

Most teachers are working well together and show a willingness to collaborate. This attitude contributes to high morale, sets a positive tone within the school, and engenders a safe environment that stimulates and supports learning. (*conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, staff and school administrators, classroom observations, observations of the school*)

Many teachers are creative and innovative in their instruction, using a variety of techniques. They succeed in making learning for their students interesting and meaningful by involving them in well thought out authentic projects such as mock trials, archeological “digs”, oral presentations, graphs, charts and maps, field trips, laboratory activities, and culinary life skills. However, some teachers do not incorporate these techniques, but rather cling to traditional practices. Therefore, there is a gap in student interest and achievement. (*classroom observations, following students, conversations and interviews with students, SALT Survey 1999*)

Regular and special education teachers work well together across grade levels and subject areas. Their cooperative work results in the enthusiasm and exemplary instruction needed to close the equity gaps between regular and special education students. (*Information Works 1999 and 2000, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

While teachers are not now using computer technology very often in daily teaching, many see its potential. Teachers are providing strong leadership to an initiative to use technology more effectively throughout the school. The majority of computer equipment was acquired through aggressive grant writing by the faculty. Seventeen teachers at NCMS have taken part in intensive technology training during summer workshops led by NCMS faculty. (*conversations and interviews with teachers, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with students, scheduled meetings with district administration*)

Commendations for North Cumberland Middle School for:

Positive and enthusiastic faculty

Strong teacher-led technology initiative

Excellent collaboration between special and regular education teachers

Recommendations for North Cumberland Middle School:

Adapt educational strategies to address standards-based instruction, varied assessment models, and multiple intelligence learning styles in all classes.

Develop a long-range technological plan encompassing budgeting, purchasing of computer and networking equipment, as well as training.

Continue professional development in technology towards curriculum integration and practical application.

Recommendations for the Cumberland School District:

Hire a district technology coordinator.

Support this school financially to carry out the long-range technology plan.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *observations of the school*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with students, teachers, staff, district and school administrators*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students, parents*
- ◆ *Following students*
- ◆ *School Improvement Plan*
- ◆ *From the Principal's Pen*
- ◆ *Examination of school documents*

Conclusions

A lack of communication exists within the educational community. This diminishes the overall effectiveness of the NCMS mission and programs. Some parents expressed that, with the exception of *From the Principal's Pen*, school to home communications fail to adequately inform the school community of team happenings, after school organized clubs, activities, and schedule changes. Parents want to know more about educational reform efforts in the school. Administrators at the school and district levels disagree on the procedures necessary for the resolution of key school issues such as the need of additional personnel, transportation, and equipment. (*examination of school documents, conversations and interviews with district, school administrators, teachers, staff, and parents, observations of the school, From the Principal's Pen*)

Teams are at different stages of effectiveness in working together to successfully coordinate thematic units, flexible scheduling, curriculum, project development, class assignments, homework, tests, and culminating activities. Some teams demonstrate impressive progress in this direction. Unfortunately, others lag behind. Unified Arts are not incorporated into the team concept, therefore some students are unable to participate in portions of the program. Team reports communicating progress, concerns, and goals are neither required nor encouraged. These inconsistencies reduce the positive effects of the teaming philosophy. (*conversations and interviews with district administration, school administration and teachers, classroom observations*)

Staffing in certain areas is inadequate for the proper functioning of the school. The school secretary is overwhelmed by the requirements needed to properly assist the principal, vice-principal, guidance counselors, teachers, parents, and students. Students are helping her to complete tasks. This practice may be inappropriate considering the potentially confidential and delicate nature of these duties. The two guidance counselors are understaffed. They are burdened by a 340:1 student ratio that limits their ability to deal with all students, not only those in crises. There are no opportunities to form groups, work with students on a regular basis, or to communicate regularly with classroom teachers and parents. Compounding this situation,

there is no guidance secretarial assistance. (*conversations and interviews with teachers and staff, conversations and interviews with school and district administrators, observations of the school*)

The School Improvement Plan has set a course of progress covering a three-year span. This plan is tempered to direct change based purely on district goals. It is not a dynamic document with a clear-cut vision to produce impetus for change. It is risk free and seems to offer no challenge to foster growth. There is little specific responsibility or accountability for implementation. Professional development focusing on middle school reform and assessment is not included in the Plan, nor is it sought after by a majority of the faculty. (*examination of School Improvement Plan, scheduled meetings with the School Improvement Team, conversations and interviews with school administrators and teachers*)

Student placement and scheduling are a matter of concern to parents and students. The policy of tracking students prohibits them from reaching their full academic potential. Parents report that tracking has a negative effect on a student's self-image, causing him or her to feel academically inferior. Students indicate feelings of inadequacy regarding their academic placement. (*conversations and interviews with students, conversations and interviews with parents, following students, classroom observation*)

Commendations for North Cumberland Middle School:

Pockets of effective teaming

The school secretary

Recommendations for North Cumberland Middle School:

Develop a comprehensive communication plan utilizing varied media to inform parents and the learning community at large.

Improve the communication process between the school and district administrators.

Implement a comprehensive professional development plan to ensure high performing teams.

Explore scheduling options to provide equal opportunities in the Unified Arts area.

Identify and use exceptional teachers to model and conduct on-site workshops demonstrating effective classroom strategies, assessment, and teaming.

Develop a more comprehensive School Improvement Plan that is responsive to identified weaknesses and needs.

Review and revise tracking policy to ensure equitable placement.

Recommendations for Cumberland School District

Increase the number of guidance counselors and clerical personnel.

7. Final Advice to the School

The North Cumberland Middle School community is working hard to provide the best education for its students. All adults work well together and have the qualities needed to continue to improve classroom practice and student learning. You are fortunate professionals to work in an environment where your students are so well behaved and eager to learn. Continue to encourage this enthusiasm in the classroom by incorporating varied teaching techniques and modes of assessment. Many teachers are already making great progress in innovative instruction while some teachers need to revisit their teaching practices. Recognize your exceptional teachers within the building and utilize them to model during professional development activities. These activities may include classroom strategies, successful team planning and interdisciplinary units. This “in-house” training needs to be ongoing and supported by the administration. Develop a professional development plan and include it in the School Improvement Plan.

Effective writing and reading instruction across the curriculum must be implemented immediately if your students’ achievement gaps are to decrease. This cannot be left to the English and Reading teachers alone to accomplish.

The life-blood of a school is an active and involved parent group. In this age of technology, the opportunities to share information such as homework assignments, upcoming events, questions and answers through electronic mail and web-sites strengthens the connection between school and home and expands the learning community. Utilize your newly wired school and technologically trained faculty to foster this very important connection.

The need for additional staffing in the guidance department is essential to provide a nurturing environment for the student. Middle school-aged students need to make strong adult connections. The ability to have a counselor frequently meet with students throughout their middle school career ensures that students make a positive connection with an adult. To this end, the addition of a guidance counselor and a guidance secretary is recommended.

Revisit the practice of supplementing the administrative assistant with student helpers in the office. Their use is not acceptable in an environment rich in confidential and delicate home/school communications and activities. A second administrative assistant is strongly needed to complete all the tasks that make the school function smoothly.

The district administrator must restructure and clarify the methods used with the building administrator to communicate concerns, and fiscal, academic, and personnel needs. Also, begin the discussion now with the Cumberland community about how it will address the influx of additional students into the already “full” North Cumberland Middle School so that the present and future progress for increased learning is not hampered here.

It is the hope and intent of the SALT Visit team that you will embrace this report, study it and let it guide you to make the changes that are needed in your school so that it becomes an even better place for all your children to learn and grow.

NORTH CUMBERLAND MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM

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Reading Teacher

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Cheryl Davis
Parent

Joan Fagnoli
Assistant Principal

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THE SALT VISIT TEAM

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

Catalpa Ltd. Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

North Cumberland Middle School

November 17, 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.
December 6, 2000

