



Ella Risk School

Central Falls

SALT Visit Team Report

February 16, 2001



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 Ella Risk School from February 13- 16, 2001 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 Ella Risk 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 Ella Risk School.

The visit team collected its evidence from the following:

- ◆ *a total of 112 classroom observations which totaled over 84 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 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:*
 - *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:*
 - *Ella Risk School Improvement Plan*
 - *Central Falls district strategic plan*
 - *Central Falls School District Budget Report*
 - *Ella Risk School Budget*
 - *“Success for All”-Principal’s and Facilitator’s Manual*
 - *1999-2000 SALT Survey report*
 - *Contract between the Central Falls Teacher’s Union and the Central Falls School District*
 - *Central Falls Public Schools’ non-tenured and tenured teacher evaluation forms*
 - *classroom textbooks*
 - *1999 Information Works!*
 - *1999, 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*

- *1999 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 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 Ella Risk 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 Central Falls, 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 Ella Risk School

Ella Risk School serves students in grades one through five. It is located in the city of Central Falls, Rhode Island and is part of the Central Falls School District. Formerly, the school housed about 230 students in grades one through three. During the academic years from 1997-1998 and 1998-1999, the Ella Risk School was housed at another site, so their new structure could be built. For the school year 1998-1999, one grade four class was added. At the opening of the new Ella Risk School in September of 1999, approximately 480 students in grades one through five were registered.

Of the 475 students attending Ella Risk Elementary School, 25 percent are white, 64 percent are Hispanic, eight percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 11 percent are black. Students totaling 20 percent receive special education services and 100 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

The Central Falls School District is governed by a special state administrator, Virginia da Mota, who functions as a school committee. The special state administrator is assisted by a School District Advisory Board, which is made up of eight members and five ex-officio members. The district is also run by a superintendent and a district staff of five. Ella Risk School's students are served by a professional staff of one administrator, 34 full and part time faculty, students, 20 aides and support personnel, and three custodians.

According to *Information Works! 2000*, students at Ella Risk School have scored the same or better than similar students in all areas of the New Standards Reference Exam. In addition, 75 percent of the students have met the standard on the reading basic understanding subtest for the past two years. From 1999-2000, students' scores have declined on all mathematics subtests, the reading interpretation subtest, and the writing conventions subtest. Students' scores in the Rhode Island Writing Assessment have also declined; from 21 percent meeting the standard in 1999 to two percent in 2000. An equity gap exists between Hispanic students, who scored higher than white students, on the writing effectiveness subtest.

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 Ella Risk School is available at www.rido.net.

Students at Ella Risk School benefit from a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Grant (CSR), a three-year federal grant program for selected schools seeking to implement school-wide reform. Ella Risk School has used this funding since 1999 to implement "Success for All", a nationally recognized reading program. Selected first grade students are also offered a tutoring program.

3. PORTRAIT OF Ella Risk School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Ella Risk School is housed in a new and attractive three-story building. Its students reflect the multicultural diversity found within Central Falls. Inside, the atmosphere is warm and welcoming. The children are energetic, friendly and are eager to learn. The staff is dedicated and nurturing. They have embraced the challenge of a new school-wide reading program, "Success for All." Teachers are working diligently to implement it correctly. However, in strict adherence to this model, other learning opportunities are sometimes neglected.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *1999 Information Works!*
- ◆ *1998,1999, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
- ◆ *1999, 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*
- ◆ *examination of student work*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *1999-2000 SALT Survey report*

Conclusions

Students at Ella Risk School perform poorly in mathematics. Between 1999-2000, Ella Risk’s students’ scores on the New Standards Reference Exam decreased from 42 percent to 30 percent meeting the standard in skills, from 25 percent to 7 percent meeting the standard in concepts, and from 4 percent to 2 percent meeting the standard in problem solving. They spend an insufficient amount of time learning mathematics. In addition, they have a limited knowledge of the language of mathematics. Some students use manipulatives regularly to aid them in their understanding of concepts and to demonstrate their reasoning in problem solving. However, other students complete worksheets as the only demonstration of their proficiency in computation. There is a limited use of calculators, visual aids, computers or other tools and students are not given the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge in multiple ways. These limited mathematical experiences are not rigorous enough to prepare students to meet the standards in mathematics. (*following students, classroom observations, teacher interviews, student work, 1999, 2000 New Standards Reference Exams, 1999-2000 SALT Survey report*)

Student writing lacks elaboration, rich language usage, and a strong student voice. Content and conventions are not clearly understood or employed. There is not enough writing in the content areas. Students are writing to a grade level monthly prompt, collecting their work in folders, using adult-created checklists to assist them in their writing, and learning to write “meaningful sentences.” Some are writing in a limited variety of genres, and are responding to literature. They write in journals, often with limited freedom of expression. Some students are cooperatively using adult-composed rubrics to self assess their writing. They are using benchmark papers to assist them in assessing their writing and the writing of their peers. The steps of process writing are posted, but few students use them. Despite the frequency of writing practice, the quality of students’ writing shows little growth on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment and all areas of the New Standards Reference Exams, except in writing effectiveness. (*following students, classroom observations, student work, Rhode Island Writing Assessment, New Standards Reference Exam*)

Students are engaged in practices that are based on the “Success for All” reading program. Younger students enjoy listening to stories. Older students are less engaged by the programs’ selections. Students read the

same book in a choral reading format. Individual students must read the same book, with the same pace and inflection, often echoing after their teacher. To become independent and lifelong readers, students need more ownership in their reading. The students at Ella Risk School use strategies such as sounding out words, using their fingers to guide their reading, and retrieve words from sight word lists and word walls. They are given opportunities to make predictions and explore language to extend their vocabulary. Many students retell teacher-read stories with some accuracy and share their reading with each other. The results of these opportunities are reflected in their scores on the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam reading /basic understanding subtest (75 percent meeting the standard.). Students have limited opportunity to acquire self-correction strategies that would enable them to assimilate and understand more complex text. This is supported by their reading interpretation scores on the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam (45 percent meeting the standard). (*following students, classroom observations, meeting with students, 2000 New Standards Reference Exam*)

Recommendations for Ella Risk School

Increase instructional time in mathematical concepts, skills and problem solving. Investigate a new text series to correspond with the new curriculum you have implemented.

Employ process writing strategies through a variety of genres and consistently implement them throughout the grades and across content areas.

Encourage students to choose books independently. Develop leveled classroom libraries that include a variety of literature, and provide opportunities for students to respond to independent reading.

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 meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students, parents, and School Improvement Team*
- ◆ 1999 Information Works!
- ◆ *SALT Survey report 1999-2000*

Conclusions

The teachers at Ella Risk School are compassionate, hard-working, and dedicated professionals. They exhibit resiliency and are willing to take risks on behalf of their students. They have high expectations for their students' behavior. They highly value student citizenship. Many take part in professional development opportunities. They are all committed to school reform on behalf of their students, regardless of personal sacrifice. (*observations of the school, classroom observations, following students, interviews with teachers, meeting with parents, meeting with district, meeting with principal, meeting with School Improvement Team*)

All teachers assess students for placement purposes in the "Success for All" reading program. Additionally, ongoing assessment is done by teachers through the use of individual reading comprehension questions. Some teachers utilize written tests in other subjects, most of which employ lower level thinking skills. This does not prepare students to achieve the standard. Teachers also use rubrics as an evaluative tool, however, their understanding of rubrics' use and purpose is inconsistent. Rubric use and purpose is unclear from grade to grade or even within the same grade. Many rubrics used by teachers are in language that is not easily understood by students and consequently, is of little assistance to students in assessing and improving their work. Clear criteria for use and purpose of rubrics is not uniformly determined, resulting in assessment that is inconsistent and inequitable. (*following students, classroom observations, student work, interviews with teachers, conversations with students, meeting with students, meeting with district, meeting with parents*)

Teachers employ varied instructional strategies. They provide a print rich environment for their students, allow them to take risks, ask questions freely, and encourage them to demonstrate their understanding in multiple ways. However, the print rich environment they provide is in perfect commercial uniformity, (required by "Success for All") is not easily understood or read by children. There is a limited display of the wonderful work that the children are capable of doing in most classrooms. (*classroom observations, following students, meeting with students, interviews with teachers*)

In some classrooms, teachers expect their students to achieve on a high level and work hard to challenge

them. In other classrooms, teachers do not demand the same high quality of work from their students. These teachers sometimes review and repeat lessons, asking students to employ rote memorization, rather than higher order thinking skills. They present developmentally inappropriate lessons, leaving students unchallenged which prevents them from reaching their highest level of performance. (*classroom observations, following a student, interviews with teachers 1999-2000 SALT Survey report*)

Commendations for Ella Risk School

Teachers' dedication and commitment to their students

Recommendations for Ella Risk School

Re-examine the purpose and use of rubrics.

Celebrate your students and display their work.

Challenge your students to achieve high standards.

Recommendations for the Central Falls School District

Provide additional training for teachers in the development and use of rubrics.

6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *observations of the school*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, staff and school administrators*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students , parents, and School Improvement Team*
- ◆ *Following students*
- ◆ Ella Risk School Improvement Plan
- ◆ Central Falls District Teacher Evaluation Tool
- ◆ Central Falls District and Teacher’s Union Contract

Conclusions

“Success for All” was chosen by the Ella Risk School leadership and faculty as a school wide measure to improve students’ reading scores. The school has invested a great deal of time and resources in using test data, looking at student work and other measures to inform instruction. They have made a unified effort to target literacy instruction. (*meeting with school improvement team, meeting with district, meeting with principal, interviews with teachers*)

The Central Falls District Teacher Evaluation tool is inadequate and ineffective and does not allow for reflection on the part of teachers. Pre-conference evaluation is only required of non-tenured teachers and unconnected to required observation for tenured teachers. There is no portfolio required to document an educator’s professional growth and little requirement for a professional improvement plan. In short, this tool does not support professional growth. (*meeting with district, meeting with principal, Central Falls Teacher Evaluation tool*)

The environment at Ella Risk School is positive, warm and caring. Children and their learning are a universal priority. The school has strong and visionary educational leadership, enabling it to take on the challenge of a school wide approach to reading. However, the challenges in implementing this program, “Success for All”, result in scheduling and time management struggles. As a result of this highly scripted program, the focus on other content areas and the opportunity for teachers to be innovative has been greatly reduced. The time and energy required by this program hinders the flexibility and spontaneity needed to teach children with different learning styles and needs. (*classroom observations, following students, interviews with teachers, meeting with students, meeting with principal, meeting with School Improvement Team, meeting with school district*)

Few children benefit from their parents' active involvement in their education at Ella Risk School. Parents express a desire to be more involved in their children's education, but there are issues which impede their ability to do so, such as the scheduling of meeting times and language barriers. Monthly parent coffee hours and monthly night meetings are insufficient for building a network of parents needed to support the goals and vision of the Ella Risk School community. There is no formal parent teacher organization. There are few active community partnerships working in this school. Despite some opportunity for effective written and oral communication between teaching staff and parents, these opportunities are inadequate. There is no after school educational enrichment program for Ella Risk students who repeatedly express the desire to stay after school hours. (*meeting with parents, interviews with teachers, conversations with students, meeting with students, meeting with School Improvement Team*)

Children's safety is compromised during recess at Ella Risk School. There is little enforcement of rules, and there are no structured activities or equipment that focus positively on children's play. Students need instruction in activities to promote fitness and healthy lifestyles, including an understanding of games and good sportsmanship. In addition, children are regularly being deprived of exercise as a part of their physical education program due to classes being held inside classrooms. (*observations of the school, interviews with teachers, classroom observations, meeting with students*)

The quality of special education services at Ella Risk School is dependent upon students' program placement. In most self-contained classrooms, students are receiving exceptional services. Their placements are appropriate and these students are learning. However, in some "self-contained" classrooms, special needs students' placements are inappropriate and are detrimental to their learning and safety and that of other students. This is a tremendous disservice to the children and staff involved. (*classroom observations, following students, interviews with teachers*)

The Central Falls District and Teacher's Union have developed a "Professional Development Academy" to conduct teacher-generated courses. This affords teachers the opportunity to share their knowledge and talents with their colleagues. Allowing teachers to determine their own needs for professional development and rewarding them financially for their commitment to their own continued learning, demonstrates that the Central Falls School District and Teacher's Union are committed to educational reform and they are providing staff with the tools to accomplish it. (*meeting with district, meeting with principal, Central Falls Teachers' Union and District teacher contract*)

Commendations for Ella Risk School

Commitment to the improvement of student achievement in reading

Recommendations for Ella Risk School

Re-examine the utilization of time before, during and after the school day.

Broaden the scope of parental involvement.

Explore the use of recess improvement plans, such as "Playfair." Employ these new strategies in your physical education program.

Recommendations for the Central Falls School District

Revise the teacher evaluation tool to drive instructional improvement.

Reevaluate the placement of special education students, and consider all students' needs.

Commendation for the Central Falls School District

The outstanding “Professional Development Academy”, which is a model for other communities to emulate.

7. Final Advice to the School

The SALT Visiting Team recognizes the talent and potential in the children and staff of the Ella Risk School community. Students need to know that they can be successful, and that when they try, they can achieve great things. Motivate your children to envision the opportunities they have for achievement. The bar of expectations must be raised so that all can reach those opportunities. The potential that exists here is unlimited.

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

Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

Ella Risk School

February 16, 2001

To complete the Catalpa Ltd. report endorsement, I discussed the conduct of the visit with the Visit Chair while it was in process, I observed a portion of the visit and I have reviewed this report. 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.
March 19, 2001