



# Middletown High School

Middletown

## SALT Visit Team Report

February 9, 2001



**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.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt](http://www.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt)**

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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 Middletown High School from February 5, 2001 to February 9, 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 Middletown High 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 Middletown High School.

The visit team collected its evidence from the following:

- ◆ *a total of 135 full classroom observations and 28 partial classroom observations, which totaled over 115 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 eleven 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*
  - *department chairs*
- ◆ *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:*
  - *MHS Team Visitation Book*
  - *MHS Strategic Plan*
  - *Article 31 Professional Development Investment Fund Plan*
  - *District Strategic Plan, November 16, 2000*
  - *1999-2000 SALT Survey report*
  - *Middletown Technology Plan*
  - *Certificate of Initial Mastery, Student Guide and Administrative Implementation Guide*
  - *Agreement Between the Middletown School Committee and the NEA Middletown, September 1, 1998-August 31, 2001*
  - *Middletown Public Schools Building Advisory Committee, 2000-2001: An Interim Report-Buildings and*

*Grounds, October 19, 2000*

- *Teacher Evaluation Handbook*
- *Principal's Annual Report, 1999-2000*
- *department portfolios*
- *classroom textbooks*
- 1998 Information Works!
- 1999 Information Works!
- 2000 Information Works!
- *1998, 1999, 2000, New Standards Reference Examination results*
- *1998, 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 30 hours in six separate meetings spanning the five 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 Middletown High 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 Middletown, 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 Middletown High School

Middletown High School is a four-year comprehensive high school that serves students from Middletown and Little Compton in grades nine through twelve. The Newport County Regional Special Education District services some of the district's students' special education needs here as well. Built in 1961, the building is located in the south central section of Aquidneck Island and is part of the Middletown, Rhode Island School System.

A five-member elected school committee governs the school district; a superintendent, assistant superintendent, various directors and a business manager administer the school system. A professional staff of three administrators, 84 full and part time faculty, four guidance counselors, five secretarial staff, 12 aides, and five custodians serves the Middletown High School students.

MHS offers students various educational options. Beside advanced placement classes and the early enrollment program at Rhode Island College, students are involved in career/technical programs, cooperative work experience, independent learning, Project Success for Academic Intervention, and the Alternative Learning Program.

Also, after ten years of research and training, the school is implementing the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) beginning with the graduating class of 2005. Students in this program will also earn a high school diploma. Discussions are underway for the possibility of MHS becoming an NCEE America's Choice High School.

Of the 827 students attending Middletown High School, 89 percent are white, seven percent are black, two percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, one percent Hispanic and one percent Native American. Approximately one hundred thirty students totaling 16 percent receive special education services, four percent are in self-contained classes. Twelve percent of the student body is eligible for free or reduced lunch.

The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard on six of seven subtests of the New Standards Reference Exam between school years 1999 and 2000 has increased. These percentages include Mathematics: Skills (48-60%); Concepts (19%-30%); Problem Solving (15%-24%) and English Language Arts Reading: Basic Understanding (31%-51%); Analysis and Interpretation (17%-46%) and Writing Effectiveness (19%-36%). The Rhode Island Writing Assessment achievement percentages show increases as well (39%-56%). Eighty two percent of MHS students meet or exceed the standard on the 2000 English Language Arts Writing Conventions subtest of the New Standards Reference Exam. Also, the percentage of MHS students meeting and exceeding the standard on six of seven subtests in year 2000 is equal to the percentage attained by similar students statewide.

Equity gaps (a difference of more than 15%) exist between general education students and special education students on Mathematics Skills and Problem Solving subtests and the English Language Arts Reading Analysis and Interpretation and Writing Effectiveness subtests of the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam. Regular education students are outperforming special education students. Also, an equity gap exists on the Mathematics Skills subtest of the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam with white students outperforming all other students.

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 Middletown High School is available at [www.ridoe.net](http://www.ridoe.net).

### 3. PORTRAIT OF Middletown High School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Sitting midway up the hill on a secluded drive, Middletown High School presents a strong, secure and serene image to the approaching visitor. Bright and welcoming, but a little threadbare around the edges, the forty-year-old building houses a highly professional faculty and polite student body respectfully working together for the mutual purpose of student learning.

The school community faces great challenges and changes. MHS is currently in the vanguard of the state reform movement embracing standards-based teaching and learning, block scheduling, the Certificate of Initial Mastery and the NCEE America's Choice Schools initiatives. The teachers are working hard to make the adjustments in teaching needed to see these initiatives flourish. Students also share in this effort to improve their work and learn at high levels. However, in their attempts to transition quickly into a model high school at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a certain level of frustration, mistrust, and tension among the faculty, administration and staff. The strand that runs through all the initiatives is not clear to all, nor is it clear how these initiatives further the school's mission. Conversations take place, but true two-way communication is missing.

Other significant issues exist. Technology needs, the district level guidance director, and decision-making issues within the school must be addressed. This is, without question, a vibrant involved learning community, one that is experiencing a certain level of difficulty as it works toward the very high goals it has set for itself.



## 4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

### Sources of Evidence

- ◆ 1999, 2000 Information Works!
- ◆ *1999, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
- ◆ *1999, 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*
- ◆ *examination of student work*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with students and teachers*
- ◆ *meeting with students*
- ◆ *department portfolios*
- ◆ NCEE New Standards

### Conclusions

Students are writing productively and extensively in many curricular areas. For example, students are analyzing characters from Shakespeare, writing persuasive, narrative, and interpretative essays in most disciplines, synthesizing learned information, writing in journals, explaining solutions to problems, writing lab reports, and peer editing. These activities improve students' writing skills while demonstrating their content knowledge. In contrast, some students are answering questions on worksheets, copying notes, and supplying short answers on quizzes that do not develop the same skills. It is notable that 82% of the students are meeting or exceeding the standard on the 2001 New Standards Reference Exam Writing Conventions subtest. Further, it is laudable that the scores on the Writing Effectiveness subtest have nearly doubled from 19% to 36% over the last two years. Also, there is an increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment (39%-56%) during the same time period. (*classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, New Standards Reference Exam results, Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*)

Students demonstrate their learning by researching long term projects and papers using both print and internet resources, creating portfolios, giving oral presentations, producing videos, role playing, singing, creating power point presentations, communicating in foreign languages, and creating art work. Students effectively use their various learning styles and creativity to produce high quality work. These reflect authentic student achievement as outlined by the NCEE Standards. (*classroom observations, department portfolios, examination of student work, following students, NCEE New Standards*)

Students are effectively problem solving in various classes. They are examining cause and effect in math problems, science experiments, English literature interpretation, healthy life choices, and historical events. Students are clearly explaining their thinking processes, hypothesizing and predicting using data, choosing alternatives, and managing time. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard on the

Mathematics Problem Solving subtest of the New Standards Reference Exam has increased (15%-24%) in the last two years. (*classroom observations, following students, New Standards Reference Exam results*)

While active reading within classrooms was not observed extensively, the caliber of reports, written material, and knowledge of current events demonstrates that reading with understanding is taking place. Students analyze, interpret and relate reading material across the curriculum. This is substantiated by the increase in percentages of students meeting or exceeding the standard on the New Standards Reference Exam on the 1999 and 2000 Reading Basic Understanding subtest (31%-51%) and Reading Analysis and Interpretation subtest (17%-46%). (*New Standards Reference Exam results, classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, department portfolios*)

Students know and understand the purpose of a rubric and use it to achieve high standards in their work. They use these rubrics, across the curriculum, to effectively revise, peer edit, give oral presentations, complete art products, improve various types of writings, complete projects, and peer and self evaluate. (*classroom observations, following students, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Students are respectful, polite, helpful, eager to participate, forthcoming with their opinions, and cognizant of the difference between their social and intellectual development. Students are relaxed and feel safe in the school environment. Despite student recognition of inconsistencies in some school procedures, they are ready and willing to learn with a spirit of cooperation. (*classroom observations, conversations and interviews with students, meeting with students, following students*)

## Commendations for Middletown High School

Focused, polite, conscientious students

Adaptable students

Eager to learn

## Recommendations for Middletown High School:

Continue the students' progress toward achieving high standards.

Engage, empower and support students to have a meaningful, responsible role in the school.

Give all students a vehicle in the school through which their voice may be heard.

## 5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

### Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *observations of the school*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, and school administrators*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *examination of student work*
- ◆ *examination of textbooks*
- ◆ *examination of rubrics*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students, parents, department chairs*
- ◆ 2000 Information Works!
- ◆ SALT Survey 2000
- ◆ *Faculty Handbook*
- ◆ *Student Handbook*
- ◆ *NCEE New Standards*
- ◆ *department portfolios*

### Conclusions:

Teachers are creating interesting and exciting lessons and activities that engage the students in active learning. Teachers are using multiple instructional strategies which include: integration of technology, long term projects and papers, portfolios, cooperative learning, oral presentations, dynamic direct instruction, power point presentations, conversations in foreign languages, academic interdisciplinary units and art work. These strategies afford students with different learning styles ample opportunity to achieve and demonstrate their learning, consistent with NCEE Standards. (*classroom observations, department portfolios, examination of student work, following students, NCEE New Standards, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Teachers have high expectations of all students. Teachers communicate clearly the standards students are to achieve and provide them ample opportunity to meet the standards. Although teachers allow students to revise papers and retake tests to increase achievement and demonstrate mastery, this practice is not consistently applied across the school and discourages some students' optimum performance on the initial assessments. (*meetings with students, department chairs and parents, MHS Strategic Plan, Student Handbook, Faculty Handbook*)

Challenging problem solving activities are evidenced in a number of curricular areas. These include laboratory experiments, discovery-based math (Geometry Learning Project and Math Connections); inquiry based instruction, examination of cause and effect in English literature interpretation, healthy life choices, and analysis of historical events. Teachers require students to explain their thinking processes and to hypothesize and predict using data. These activities foster the development of higher order thinking skills. (*classroom observations, following students, examining textbooks, conversations and interviews with teachers, department portfolios*)

Teachers use rubrics effectively and often. They use standards to develop rubrics that assess student work. These rubrics set high expectations for student work. The difficult work of rubric development and use is the cornerstone of this faculty's progress in meeting standards. (*classroom observation, examination of rubrics, department portfolios, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with students and teachers*)

#### Commendations for Middletown High School for:

Highly professional, dedicated teachers

Student-focused teachers

Persevering, hard working teachers

Department portfolios

#### Recommendations for Middletown High School:

Celebrate all students' work.

Continue to have high expectations for all students.

Explore ways to develop more interdisciplinary teaching.

Continue professional development to achieve school initiatives.

#### Recommendations for Middletown School District:

Include teachers in the communication loop.

Continue to fund and support professional development.

## 6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

### Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *observations of the media center and the school*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, guidance counselors, staff, school and district administrators*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students, parents, and department heads*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *MHS Strategic Plan*

### Conclusion

The school is bubbling with change, which by its very nature is not neat and linear. Pressures for increased student achievement, different classroom practices, altered time schedules; the implementation of CIM and the addition of America's Choice impact everyone in the school community in various ways. When this dynamic is combined with the expressed lack of clear and consistent communication between various segments of administration and faculty, it leads to misunderstanding and confusion. As a result of this, many faculty members express frustration, which lowers morale. This, in turn, obscures the cohesiveness of the school's various initiatives and jeopardizes the potential for the school to move forward. (*meetings with SIT, department heads, school and district administration, students, and parents, conversations and interviews with staff and faculty*)

Technology is used in many classes and ranges from computer-assisted instruction to graphing calculators. Teachers are comfortable working with technology and a well-developed technology plan for the school exists. However, equal access to technology is not present in the classrooms or Media Center; nor are the computer labs adequate and sufficient to meet teachers' and students' educational requirements. Professionally, teachers are willing to place homework assignments on the school's website, as well as enter grades and attendance into the school's database, but there is limited opportunity and availability of computers to do so. Technical support to maintain and upgrade computers is very limited. (*observations of the media center and the school, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with teachers, meeting with school administrators*)

Shared decision-making as described in the MHS Strategic Plan is not universally practiced in the school. Decisions may originate at central administration, with the principal, or be generated from a variety of committees with no consistency in process or procedure. While much input is sought on particular topics or issues, it may be disregarded in the final decision. Faculty, staff and students perceive this as a devaluing of their voice and as disrespect. This conveys the message that their input efforts are futile. It discourages continued open-minded participation in and support of school initiatives and will impede the school's further progress. (*MHS Strategic Plan, conversations and interviews with teachers, meetings with department heads,*

*students, SIT, school administrators)*

A district level guidance director oversees the high school guidance department. Some leadership responsibilities in guidance are decentralized to the school but the delegation of authority is not. The lack of guidance services during the summer is inconsistent with the transient nature of the student community. This significantly affects the smooth functioning of guidance tasks and results in delays and confusion.

*(conversations and interviews with guidance counselors and department heads, meeting with parents)*

The MHS Strategic Plan is a comprehensive document, which has extensive strategies and action plans for implementing change within the building. Timeframes for implementing the action plans are “in process” and “on going”. All of this continuing activity contributes to the frustration levels in the building. Holding people accountable and assessing progress on the plan’s objectives can only be done with specific dates for project completion. *(MHS Strategic Plan, conversations and interviews with teachers, meetings with SIT, department heads, school and district administrators)*

Commendations for Middletown High School for:

A leader in high school reform

NCEE Course One training for all teachers and a standards coach

A safe environment for all

Recommendations for Middletown High School:

Reevaluate and adopt a decision-making process.

Fund and support the school technology plan.

Develop an effective means of communication with all stakeholders.

Provide opportunities for team building in the school.

Recommendations for Middletown School District:

Delegate appropriate authority for timely completion of guidance functions.

Implement and fully fund the school’s technology plan.

## 7. Final Advice to the School

Middletown High School serves as a beacon for school reform in the state of Rhode Island. It is a vital learning community using the latest in education research and thinking and courageously striving to provide a high quality NCEE standards-based education for all students. Every teacher has received Course One training and is working hard to implement changes in instructional methods to improve student learning. Students are demonstrating positive increases in performance to standard. This is commendable.

However, this tremendous growth in capacity cannot be expected to come easily or smoothly. MHS is experiencing some difficulties regarding teacher overload, teacher support of initiatives, clarity of roles and responsibilities, the process of decision-making, and unity of vision. These issues must be dealt with soon so that your forward momentum of reform will not diminish. Begin to develop some meaningful dialogue in the school community with all stakeholders at the table. Listen carefully to one another so that all are informed and on the “same page”. Build a focused vision with your initiatives for this will amplify and accelerate your efforts to reach that vision.

In this age of information, your utilization of computers and other forms of educational technology to promote student learning is impressive. Continue to advocate for your Technology Plan and press the community officials to fully fund it from both public and private sources. Use your technology-trained faculty to help spearhead this effort.

Celebrate your successes, pat yourselves on the back for what you have accomplished and don't get discouraged. Growth is rarely achieved without difficulty and you have come a long way. Continue to strive for quality education and a positive learning environment. Your students and community will be the beneficiaries of your hard work.

## Middletown High School Improvement Team

Mason Hawes, Co-Chair  
Science Teacher

Sherrie Staveley, Co-Chair  
Social Studies Teacher

Beth Raffa  
English Teacher

Jane Perry  
Media Specialist

Jack Regan  
Principal

Stephen Arendt  
Parent

Daryl Kolator  
Parent

Susan Schenck  
Parent

Sean Malvey  
Student

Casey Regan  
Student



## The SALT Visit Team

Margaret M. Della Bitta, Science Teacher  
South Kingstown High School  
South Kingstown, Rhode Island  
(on leave to the Rhode Island Department of Education to serve as a SALT Fellow)  
Chair of the Team

Kirsten Canzone, Art Educator  
Cranston High School East  
Cranston, Rhode Island

Patricia Carello, English Teacher  
Chariho Regional High School  
Wood River Junction, Rhode Island

Elizabeth Federman, English Teacher  
Cranston High School West  
Cranston, Rhode Island

Scott Fuller, Mathematics Teacher  
Cumberland High School  
Cumberland, Rhode Island

Mary Sylvia Harrison, President and CEO  
Rhode Island Children's Crusade  
Providence, Rhode Island

Linda M. LePage, Math Teacher  
Tiverton High School  
Tiverton, Rhode Island

Bob Mason, Adult Education Specialist  
Rhode Island Department of Education  
Providence, Rhode Island

Lorraine O'Connors, School Committee Co-Chair  
Foster/Glocester School District  
Chepachet, Rhode Island

Patricia Roberts, Assistant Principal  
Mt. Hope High School  
Bristol, Rhode Island

Barbara Sirotn, Superintendent  
East Greenwich School District  
East Greenwich, Rhode Island

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

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## Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

### **Middletown High School**

February 9, 2001

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, 1<sup>st</sup> 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.  
February 16, 2001