



Portsmouth Middle School

Portsmouth

SALT Visit Team Report

May 18, 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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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 Portsmouth Middle School from May 15 to May 18, 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 Portsmouth 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 Portsmouth Middle School.

The visit team collected its evidence from the following:

- ◆ *a total of 135 full classroom observations and 24 partial classroom observations, which totaled over 127 hours, spent in direct classroom observation. All classrooms were visited at least once. Most teachers were observed more than once.*
- ◆ *many observations of the school (outside of classroom)*
- ◆ *following ten students for a full day*
- ◆ *observing the work of teachers, specialty teachers and staff for a full day*
- ◆ *observations of the library*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with the following groups:*

- *School Improvement Team*
- *school and district administrators*
- *PMS Cabinet meeting*
- *House team meeting*
- *students*
- *parents*

- ◆ *conversations and interviews with students, teachers, SIT chair, 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:*
 - *School Improvement Plan for Portsmouth Middle School*
 - *Portsmouth Schools Strategic Plan, July, 2000-June, 2003*
 - *Portsmouth School Department Technology Plan, 1999-2004*
 - *Portsmouth Public Schools Policy Book, 2001*
 - *Portsmouth Teacher Contract*
 - *PMS Monthly Calendars, Monthly Reports*
 - *various curricular guides and social studies curriculum maps*
 - *district budget plan*

- *PMS SALT Visit book*
- *Heritage, Student Year Book*
- *Portsmouth School Department Orientation (Curriculum Presentation-August 10, 2000)*
- *Assessing Student Performance (Assessment Methods-September, 1999)*
- *1999-2000 SALT Survey report*
- *classroom textbooks*
- *1999 Information Works!*
- *2000 Information Works!*
- *2001 Information Works!*
- *1998, 1999, 2000 New Standards Reference Examination results*
- *1998, 1999, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
- *2000 New Standards English Language Arts Reference Examination School Summary*
- *2000 New Standards Mathematics Reference Examination School Summary*

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 32 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 Portsmouth 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 Portsmouth, and the Rhode Island Department of Education will share that responsibility.

Following your school's review of this report, consider what changes to make in your school improvement plan. The revised plan will form the basis for negotiating a Compact for learning with your district. The Compact's purpose is to ensure that your school and your district work out an agreement about the most important priorities for your school to work and how to best target district support in reaching them. Your RIDE Field Service Team representative will offer some assistance in facilitating the preparing of the Compact.

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 Portsmouth Middle School

Portsmouth Middle School serves students in grades 5-8 for the town of Portsmouth, Rhode Island. It is located on the northern end of Aquidneck Island in Narragansett Bay. It is one of six public schools that comprise Portsmouth's School System. The building opened in September 1971 and is "home" to 940 students today.

A school committee with seven members who are elected to staggered four-year terms governs the district. A superintendent and a district staff of three administer the school system. The Portsmouth Middle School students are served by a professional staff of two administrators, four house leaders, one for each grade, 78 teachers/professional staff, nine support staff (aides), eight clerical and five custodial staff.

Several noteworthy initiatives are underway this year. They include the Performance Enhancement Plan for grades 5 and 6, Saturday Academy for grades 7 and 8, Saturday Morning Jazz Ensemble, Peace Through Healthy Communication Program, smART Gallery, Arts for Life Day, Destination Imagination, and the China Exchange Initiative. The PTO sponsors the Drama Appreciation Program, Family Nights, Rec Nights and the Sports Spectacular. Grants obtained this year include monies from: East Bay Educational Collaborative for the development of a special education handbook; National Gardening Association for the student created garden on campus; Earthwatch Institute which allowed a teacher to work with students to understand language acquisition through the study of chimpanzees; and the Goff Teacher Grants to expand the robotics and applied engineering project for 7th grade.

At Portsmouth Middle School, ninety percent of the students are white, two percent are African American, one percent are Asian, one percent are Hispanic/Latino, one percent are native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and five percent indicated a multi-response. As of April 30th of this year, 59 students or approximately six percent have free lunch or reduced lunch status.

Using Information Works 2001 as a basis, the percentage of eligible eighth grade students in this school who meet or exceed the standard on five of the seven subtests of the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam is significantly higher than the percentage of similar students statewide. On the remaining two subtests, students at this school performed as well as similar students statewide.

Equity gaps (a difference of more than 15%) exist between general education students and special education students in the areas of Mathematics, Reading, and Writing as found in the Achievement over the past three years (aggregated data from 1998-2000) as found in 2001 *Information Works!*

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 Portsmouth Middle School is available at www.ridoenet.net.

3. PORTRAIT OF Portsmouth Middle School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Portsmouth Middle School is nestled back from the edges of a residential road presenting a serene appearance to all that approach. Upon entering, one is greeted by polite, enthusiastic, and well-behaved students who move along quickly through the immaculately clean and well-maintained facility. Colorful student artwork is displayed with pride in the foyer and hallways. The design of the school supports a true middle school concept by separating the school into four smaller “schools” or houses, learning centers with collapsing walls and a library at the center.

Many teachers are trained in standards based instruction and assessment and strive to integrate these into their classes. While most are meeting with success, some teachers are just beginning this journey. The administration encourages teacher efforts to implement standards without “dictating” the change. Students work diligently to create products that demonstrate their knowledge, learning and competence in various subject areas.

Creativity and the arts are encouraged through their integration within the curriculum and the many options for after school activities. Equity is important to the school community as evidenced by the faculty’s dedication to maximize the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classes, with appropriate support for these students’ special needs.

However, these laudable efforts are hampered by the isolation and disconnect that many teachers experience in their respective houses. Ample time for meeting, planning, and implementing the new curricula is not available in the present schedule. The difficulties in communication among the various houses and grades limits the effective coordination of subject content and smooth student transitions from year to year. Inadequate staffing in the areas of guidance, health, and various co-curricular classes also exists. Also, some teachers need additional leadership and support to change teaching practice to improve student learning.

4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *1999, 2000, 2001 Information Works!*
- ◆ *1998, 1999, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results*
- ◆ *1998, 1999, 2000, New Standards Reference Examination results*
- ◆ *examination of student work*
- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *library observations*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *scheduled meeting with students*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with students*

Conclusions

Most students write very well using the writing process. They effectively use brainstorming, rough drafting, revising, and editing to create finished products in many content areas. They produce works in a variety of genres, which include persuasive, narrative, creative, informative, technical and reflective pieces. Many students are enthusiastic, proud and eager to share their writing. Students have fun laughing and talking about their writing, and relating their work to real world experiences. Nearly fifty percent of seventh graders met and exceeded the standard on the 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment. Also, the percentage of students meeting the standard and meeting the standard with honors on the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam, Writing Effectiveness and Writing Conventions sub-tests (65% and 60%, respectively) is equal to percentages for similar students statewide. (*classroom observations, conversations and interviews with students, examination of student work, following students, 2000 Rhode Island Writing Assessment results, 2000 New Standards Reference Exam results*)

Students participate in various reading activities requiring high order/critical thinking skills using analysis, synthesis and evaluation strategies. Students demonstrate proficient reading comprehension through a variety of ways including book reports, character descriptions, dramatic presentations, formal and informal discussions. Many students read silently on a regular basis during the school day and document their progress in reading logs. These good reading practices are reflected in the high performance of Portsmouth Middle School students on the New Standards Reference Exam Reading Basic Understanding and Reading Analysis and Interpretation subtests when compared to similar students statewide. (*following students, classroom observations, examination of student work, 2000 New Standards Reference Exam results*)

Many students demonstrate exceptional problem-solving skills across the curriculum. This is evident in

projects and activities such as developing a small business, creating probability games, designing inventions, solving for unknowns in math, conducting lab experiments, and devising leadership strategies. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard on the New Standards Reference Exam Mathematics Problem Solving subtests has steadily increased over the last three years (33%, 41%, 48%). Portsmouth students performed significantly better than similar students statewide on all math subtests of the 2000 New Standards Reference Exam. (*classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, 2000 New Standards Reference Exam results*)

Most students are skilled in research techniques, using both Internet and reference materials. Students demonstrate their competence in independently applying research strategies. They successfully and confidently use these strategies to produce research papers, projects, oral presentations, science lab reports and other products across the curriculum and grade levels. By developing these learning strategies, students are resourceful and prepared for life long learning. (*classroom and library observations, following students, examination of student work*)

Most students are familiar with the concept of rubrics. Many students know how to construct and use rubrics in various subject areas. This allows them to successfully assess and improve the quality of their work. However, some students struggle with making connections between rubrics and improving their learning. They have not internalized the purpose of this assessment tool and do not derive the greatest benefit for improving their work. (*classroom observations, following students, scheduled meeting with students, examination of student work*)

The Portsmouth Middle School students are enthusiastic, friendly, and diligent. They are proud to display and eager to share their work. There is a high level of trust among the students and between the students and adults in the building. They feel safe and secure here. These qualities and attitudes support effective learning. (*classroom observations, following students, scheduled meeting with students*)

Commendations for Portsmouth Middle School

Friendly, well behaved, diligent students

Recommendations for Portsmouth Middle School

Continue using the writing process across the curriculum and among all grade levels.

Continue to encourage a variety of reading activities placing emphasis on reading analysis and interpretation.

Continue to emphasize and expand upon problem solving and research activities in all curricular areas.

Continue and expand the effort to incorporate the effective use of rubrics.

5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *classroom observations*
- ◆ *observations of the library*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with many students, teachers, and school administrators*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students*
- ◆ *examination of student work*
- ◆ *conversations and interviews with teachers and students*
- ◆ *2000 New Standards Reference Exam results*

Conclusions

Most teachers make a consistent effort to effectively incorporate writing across the curriculum. Creation of books, writing plays, creating responses to literature, journals in many content areas, free writes, reflections on learning, outlines, speeches, and collaborative writing, are just a few examples. Interdisciplinary writing occurs in some areas. Many teachers use effective and innovative strategies for editing and feedback to aid students in the development of their writing competence. However, some feedback is not sufficiently descriptive to help the students to improve their writing. While many teachers use five or six-point rubrics to assess student writing, few writing models are displayed in classrooms. Teachers use portfolios to gather writing samples that are then passed on from grade to grade. These portfolios provide a valuable record of students' writing progress over time. (*classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Teachers successfully integrate technology in the instruction of reading, writing, problem solving, and research. This practice enhances student learning and provides opportunities for authentic learning applications. A school-wide computer network facilitates instruction. (*classroom and library observations, following students, examination of student work, Portsmouth Technology Plan, scheduled meeting with District Administration*)

All teachers recognize the importance of reading in education and support students in developing an appreciation for reading in their lives. They encourage students to relate text to prior knowledge and to make connections to real life experiences. Teachers use creative ways to engage students in reading and other literacy activities. Some examples include "book in a day", role-playing, oral history presentations, video productions, Internet research, and novel reading. Silent reading periods, however, are used inconsistently for reading. (*classroom and library observations, following students, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with teachers*)

Many teachers creatively incorporate problem-solving activities in their instructional practice. They challenge students to employ higher order critical thinking skills individually and in groups. In addition, teachers use inquiry techniques to foster abstract thinking by students. By their choice of assignments, teachers facilitate the research process through the use of computers in the classrooms, the library, and computer labs. These practices positively correlate with increases in percentages of students meeting and exceeding the standard on the Mathematics Problem Solving subtest of the New Standards Reference Exam over the last three years. (*classroom and library observations, following students, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with teachers, 2001 New Standards Reference Exam results*)

Many teachers use various tools to establish clear expectations for students. Some examples include agendas, syllabi, checklists, grade sheets, and note sheets as well as student generated rubrics. Most teachers have implemented the use of rubrics as an assessment tool for student assignments. However, these rubrics are not always aligned with standards. In addition, some teachers have not clearly defined the meaning of rubrics for their students so they are not effectively used to improve student work. (*classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with teachers and students, scheduled meeting with School Improvement Team*)

Commendations for Portsmouth Middle School

Teachers who engage students in a variety of learning activities

Teachers who inspire creative and abstract thinking

Dedicated, innovative, and hard working teachers

Exceptional classroom management

Recommendations for Portsmouth Middle School

Continue the use of writing across the curriculum. Continue the strong writing program, keeping an eye on writing conventions. Provide more descriptive feedback to students to improve their writing. Display standards-based models of student writing in the classrooms.

Continue to support student reading emphasizing analysis and interpretation. Examine the use of the Silent Reading period.

Continue problem-solving activities and align projects and assignments with standards.

Investigate the use of various assessment tools while expanding and refining the 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, School Improvement Team chair*
- ◆ *scheduled meetings with school improvement team, school and district administrators, students, PMS Cabinet, House team*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *School Improvement Plan of Portsmouth Middle School*
- ◆ *Portsmouth School Department Technology Plan, 1999-2004*
- ◆ *SALT Self Study*
- ◆ *Portsmouth Middle School SALT Visit Book*
- ◆ *PMS Curriculum Presentations, August 10, 2000*
- ◆ *Portsmouth Strategic Plan*
- ◆ *various curricular guides*

Conclusions

The design of Portsmouth Middle School is exceptional as a model for the middle school concept. The four Houses of the building serve to provide small, intimate learning communities for grades five through eight. Within the houses, learning centers are established with movable walls that allow for flexibility in grouping students for educational purposes. Teams of teachers, supervised by a House leader, develop their own program and schedule to educate a common group of students. Traffic patterns in the corridors maximize instructional time and create a pleasant atmosphere. These factors all contribute to a smoothly operating, intimate environment conducive to high levels of learning. (*PMS SALT Visit book, observations of the school, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with custodian, students, teachers, scheduled meetings with district and school administration*)

While the physical layout provides appropriate separation of students by grade, the same layout creates challenges for faculty communication between Houses. This leads to a sense of isolation. Additional breakdown in communication occurs across the content areas school-wide. Factors contributing to this

breakdown in communication include a lack of academic department meetings, multiple required responsibilities of the House leaders, and the limited opportunities for House leaders to interact with the staff members in their department. Inadequate planning time in the schedule results in the additional breakdown of communication between faculty members within a learning center. Communication breakdown and decreased time for planning within the school day result in stressed communication between school and home. A few parents feel uninformed and unable to create a collaborative partnership with the school. *(classroom observations, PMS SALT Visit book, observations of the school, following of the students, conversations and interviews with teachers and students, scheduled meetings with parents, students, and school and district administration)*

The factors that lead to poor communication in the school exaggerate a dichotomy between the 5th/6th grade Houses and the 7th /8th grade Houses. The Middle School appears to be divided into two separate schools based on an elementary school philosophy and a secondary school philosophy. The approach to teaching the 5th and 6th grades differs significantly from the approach to teaching 7th and 8th grades. Teachers, parents and students express dissatisfaction, confusion, and frustration with the transition from 6th to 7th grade. *(SALT Self Study, scheduled meetings with parents, students, school administration, PMS Cabinet, and House team, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with teachers)*

The vision of both district and school administration embraces a standards-based philosophy. While many Portsmouth Middle School teachers support this vision, there are varying levels of implementation of standards-based instruction. Some teachers are implementing the changes needed for standards-based instruction. However, others yearn for specific direction from school leaders before they begin. For these teachers, the administration's facilitative style is not enough. *(following students, PMS School Improvement Plan, classroom observations, various curricular guides, scheduled meetings with district and school administrators, School Improvement Team, and PMS Cabinet, conversations and interviews with teachers, PMS Curriculum Presentations, August 10, 2000, Portsmouth Strategic Plan)*

The PMS School Improvement Plan documents a diligent and sincere effort to address the needs of the school and the community for the near future. Work to implement the plan is ongoing and reassessments are planned. It is a living document and calls for new conclusions to be added as needs arise. The school improvement team has established sub-committees for ongoing self-study and planned growth. This is a strong foundation for continued growth to improve student learning. *(scheduled meeting with School Improvement Team, School Improvement Plan, and school administration, conversations and interview with School Improvement Team chair)*

There are many exceptional programs at Portsmouth Middle School. A few examples include fine arts, special education inclusion, co-curricular classes and after school activities. Although these programs are exemplary, there are areas of concern. There are significant increases in the special education population without timely increases in staffing. Two guidance counselors, one health teacher and one part time student assistance counselor service over 900 students. The family and consumer science program is dormant, and foreign language instruction is limited to eighth grade only. The district administrators report that additional staffing is not growing as fast as increases in enrollment. These are significant challenges to the effectiveness of the present program. *(scheduled meetings with School Improvement Team, parents, school and district administration, conversations and interviews with faculty and staff)*

Commendations for Portsmouth Middle School

An immaculately maintained building

Programs supporting equity and inclusion

School pride

Recommendations for Portsmouth Middle School

Review the use of common planning time that is presently in the schedule. Revise the schedule to incorporate additional planning time to support collaborative teamwork within learning centers.

Establish functioning academic departments that communicate and plan regularly together to develop seamless curriculum across grades.

Examine and improve yearly student transitions especially between grades six and seven. Develop a more homogeneous philosophy for teaching grades five and six as well as grades seven and eight so that all transitions will be smooth.

Provide leadership and direction to staff members who require extra support as they embrace standards based instruction in their teaching practice. Provide continued professional development in standards-based instruction for all. Continue curriculum mapping and aligning curriculum to national standards.

Reevaluate the scope and content of house leader responsibilities so that they may have a larger role in leading teachers in implementing changes in curriculum and practice.

Recommendations for Portsmouth School District

Provide resources, including time, for developing curriculum and professional development in best practices.

Provide funds for additional staff.

7. Final Advice to the School

Portsmouth Middle School is an exceptional school with an environment that fosters good learning. The academic curriculum is strong as are the co-curriculars and after school activities. The administration has a clear and progressive vision for the school. The teachers are professional, diligent and supportive of that vision. The students, for their part, are eager and ready to meet the challenges put before them.

Improved teaching and learning are obviously a priority here. A staff that is receptive to professional growth and willing to implement change in practice exemplifies this priority. But there is more to do. Provide leadership, direction and support to all so that everyone will have ownership in the process. Examine your schedule and make the changes needed so that you have time to work collaboratively with all Houses. With this collaboration, your programs and expectations for students will be more uniform across the grades, eliminating the difficult transitions your students face. Communicate with your colleagues; focus on sharing your practice with each other. Look at student work together and reflect on how your teaching connects to better student learning.

The demands placed on this school by increases in student numbers must be addressed. Additional staffing in the areas of guidance, student support services, family and consumer science, and health must be on the table for discussion now so that steps can be taken to remedy these deficiencies in a well thought out timely manner.

You are a dedicated school community with your students' improved learning and success as your goal. You have the dedication and drive to see your vision become reality. Study this report carefully and use it as a guide as you take the next steps in your journey toward excellence.

Portsmouth Middle School Improvement Team

Cindy Jilling Michael Mancieri
Educator Educator

SIT Co-Chairs

Joseph Amaral
Assistant Principal

Michelle Beaulieu
Educator

Lori Berube
Educator

Jennifer Booth
Educator, House Leader

JoAnn Carvalho
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Maggie DeMenezes
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Steven Desposito
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Alison Ernest
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Fran Faria
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Marilyn Lyell
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Lisa Mello
Educator

Meryl Moore
Educator

Lisa Moy
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Sara Oliveira
Educator

Carol Strakosch
Educator

Ellen West
Educator

Harold Weymouth
Educator, House Leader

The SALT Visit Team

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

Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

Portsmouth Middle School

May 18, 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.
June 4, 2001