



# Curtis Corner Middle School

South Kingstown

## The SALT Visit Team Report

April 26, 2002



**School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT)**

**The accountability program of the Rhode Island Department of Education**

The findings of this report are those of this SALT visit team. The names and affiliations of the members of the team are in the appendix. The team follows the school visit protocol in the *Handbook for Chairs of the SALT School Visit*. The team is required to focus on what it observes at the time of the visit and is restricted from comparing the school with any other. This school visit was supported by the Rhode Island Department of Education as one component of its accountability system, School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT).

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**For information about SALT, please contact Ken Fish at 401-222-4600, x 2200 or [salt@ride.net](mailto:salt@ride.net).**

**This report is available at <http://www.ride.net/schoolimprove/salt/visits.htm>**

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# 1. THE PURPOSE AND LIMITS of this report

## Overview

This is the report of the SALT team that visited Curtis Corner Middle School from April 22-26, 2002. The following features are at the heart of the report:

- ◆ The team seeks to capture what makes this school work, or not work, as a public institution of learning. Each school presents a unique picture.
- ◆ The team does not compare this school to any other school.
- ◆ When writing the report, the team deliberately chooses the words that best convey its message to the school, based on careful consideration of what it has learned about the school dynamics.
- ◆ The team makes its judgment explicit.

The major questions the team addresses are:

- ◆ How well do the students learn at this school?
- ◆ How well does this school teach its students?
- ◆ How well does this school support learning and teaching?

The findings of the SALT report are presented in six report sections:

*Profile* describes some of the key features of the school and sums up the school's results on state tests.

The team writes *Portrait* as an overview of what it thinks are the most important themes in the conclusions that follow. While *Portrait* precedes the team's conclusions, it is written after they are complete.

The team's conclusions are about how well the team thinks the school is performing in each of the three SALT focus areas: Learning, Teaching and The School.

The team may award commendations in each focus area for aspects of the school that it considers unusual and commendable. The team must make several recommendations to the school for each focus area, drawing on the conclusions for that area. The team may make recommendations to other agencies, e.g. the district.

The team provides the school with some brief comments about how it thinks the school should proceed, in the *Final Advice* section.

The Catalpa Ltd. endorsement of the legitimacy of the report and its conclusions appears on the final page.

The SALT report creates accountability for improvement by connecting its judgments of quality and its recommendations for improvement directly to the actual work going on in this school at the time of the visit.

The team closely follows the visit protocol in the *Handbook for Chairs of the SALT School Visit*. The Catalpa endorsement certifies that this team followed the visit protocol and that this report meets all criteria required for a legitimate SALT visit report.

Members of the visit team are primarily teachers and administrators from Rhode Island public schools. The majority of team members are teachers. The names and affiliations of the team members are listed at the end of the report.

## Sources of Evidence for This Report

In order to write this report the team examines student work, school student placement test scores, and other documents related to this school. The school improvement plan for Curtis Corner Middle School was the touchstone document for the team. No matter how informative documents may be, however, there is no substitute for being at the school while it is in session—in the classrooms, in the lunchroom, and in the hallways. The team builds its conclusions primarily from information about what the students, staff, and administrators think and do during their day. Thus, the visit allows the team to build informed judgments about the teaching, learning, and support that actually takes place at Curtis Corner Middle School.

The visit team collected its evidence from the following sources of evidence:

- ◆ *observing a total of 104 complete classes and 41 partial classes. The team spent a total of over 112 hours in direct classroom observation. Every classroom was visited at least once, and most teachers were observed more than once.*
- ◆ *observing the school outside of the classroom*
- ◆ *following 10 students for a full day*
- ◆ *observing the work of teachers and staff for a full day*
- ◆ *meeting at scheduled times with the following groups:*
  - teachers*
  - school improvement team*
  - school and district administrators*
  - students*
  - parents*
  - South Kingstown School Committee Chair*
- ◆ *talking with students, teachers, department heads, staff, C.A.R.E.S. coordinator, and school administrator*
- ◆ *reviewing completed and ongoing student work*
- ◆ *interviewing teachers about the work of their students*
- ◆ *reviewing the following documents:*
  - district and school policies and practices*

*records of professional development activities*

*classroom assessments*

*Curtis Corner Middle School Improvement Plan 2001-2002*

*South Kingstown School Department District Strategic Plan 2002-2006*

*classroom textbooks*

*Management Needs Assessment January 8, 2002*

*Providence Journal, South County Independent, and Narragansett Times news articles*

*School placement tests results: Nelson-Denny, Gates-MacGinitie, and Arlin Test of Formal Reasoning Abstract Thinking Test*

*Turning Points*

*Curtis Corner School bulletin board*

*Curtis Corner daily announcements*

*Curtis Corner Middle School Information binder*

*school schedule for Curtis Corner Middle School*

*Curtis Corner Middle School Student Planner*

*S.M.I.L.E. (Science & Math Investigative Learning Experiences) brochure*

*C.A.R.E.S. (Connecting All Resources for Educational Support) binder*

The full visit team built the conclusions, commendations, and recommendations presented here through intense and thorough discussion. The team met for a total of 27 hours in six separate meetings spanning the five days of the visit. This time is exclusive of the time the team spent in classrooms, with teachers, and in meetings with students, parents, and school and district administrators.

The team must agree that every conclusion in this report:

- ◆ *is important enough to include in the report.*
- ◆ *is supported by the evidence the team has gathered during the visit.*
- ◆ *is set in the present.*
- ◆ *contains the judgment of the team.*

## Using the Report

The team deliberately chose the words, phrases, and sentences it used in its conclusions, as well as in the *Portrait* and *Final Advice*. Thus, this report is the team's best attempt to encourage and support the school's continued improvement in strengthening the learning of its students.

**The team reached consensus on each conclusion, each recommendation, and each commendation in this report.**

It is important to note that this report reflects only the week in the life of the school that was observed and considered by this team. The report does not cover what the school plans to do or what it has done in the past.

This report is not prescriptive. The value of this report will be determined by its effectiveness in improving teaching and learning. By considering how important it considers what the team has said and why, the school will take its first step in becoming accountable in a way that actually improves learning.

It is important to read this report and consider it as a whole. Recommendations and commendations should be considered in relation to the conclusions they follow.

After the school improvement team considers this report, it should make changes in the school improvement plan. The revised plan will form the basis for negotiating a Compact for Learning with the school district. The purpose of the Compact is to ensure that the school and its district work out an agreement about the best way to improve the school and the best way to target district support for the school. A RIDE Field Service Team representative will offer assistance in preparing the compact.

## 2. PROFILE OF Curtis Corner Middle School

### Background

Discussion around the reorganization of the South Kingstown Junior High School into two middle schools began over 10 years ago. The idea became a reality in September 2001, when Curtis Corner Middle School and Broad Rock Middle School opened their doors to students in grades six through eight. Curtis Corner is housed in the former South Kingstown Junior High School building, which is located in the Wakefield neighborhood of the town of South Kingstown, Rhode Island. One principal and one assistant principal comprise the administrative structure of the school. However, the assistant principal resigned from his position one week before the SALT visit, and the principal plans to leave her position within the month. At the time of the SALT visit one principal and 53 full- and part-time teachers served the 526 students in the school.

Ninety-two percent of the students are white, four percent are black (not of Hispanic origin), three percent are American Indian—Alaskan, and one percent is Asian/Pacific Islander. Sixteen percent of Curtis Corner students receive special education services, and 10 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Last year students were scheduled into three levels of ability grouping in all subject areas. This year ability grouping has been eliminated in all subjects except math. When Curtis Corner Middle School opened in September, students were organized into six academic teams, two for each grade. The school schedule includes a six-period day with a six-day rotation. The daily schedule also includes team time, during which team teachers can plan lessons together, as well as discuss team issues and concerns. Some teams have begun to coordinate activities and to work together to develop teaching units.

The school's Professional Development Committee, which is made up of the principal, two teachers, and two parents, used teacher input to determine the professional development focus for the year: teacher training in team teaching and in differentiated instruction. At times during the year outside facilitators have worked with teachers within their teams.

Curtis Corner's underlying themes center on environmental concerns, community service, and global issues. Throughout the year students have shown a generous spirit by raising money for local and national charities, including \$4000 that they sent to the American Red Cross for the children orphaned on 9/11. Through Dress up/Dress down days students also have raised hundreds of dollars for local organizations.

### State Assessment Results for Curtis Corner Middle School

Because Curtis Corner Middle School did not open its doors as a middle school until September 2001, no state assessment data for the school is yet available. The state assessment tests were administered at Curtis Corner Middle School in Spring 2002. When the results are compiled, they will be available online at <http://www.rido.e.net>.

### 3. PORTRAIT OF Curtis Corner Middle School AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Curtis Corner Middle School provides students with a safe and nurturing environment. The school building is well maintained, exceptionally clean, and physically suitable to support middle school programs. Teachers are dedicated and caring professionals, who bring to their classrooms a motivation to teach effectively. Students bring with them a strong sense of personal responsibility and a respect for each other and their teachers. They come to school prepared to learn.

These strengths are very important, but they are not enough for Curtis Corner Middle School to move all students to higher levels of learning. Teachers in some classrooms engage their students in real world complex problem-solving learning activities. However, many teachers still view themselves as information givers. They do not yet challenge all students to become risk takers in their own learning and to develop the skills of critical thinkers and complex problem solvers.

The entire Curtis Corner Middle School community lacks a clear and shared vision and a comprehensive, information-based school improvement plan to guide it in the difficult transition from being a junior high school to becoming an effective middle school model. While the district administration and the community have set a generalized direction for the school, they have given the school very little in the way of real support and resources. Existing and impending administrative vacancies within the district and the school, as well as gaps in communication among all of the school's partners, have created a climate of uncertainty at Curtis Corner Middle School. This contributes to a division in the school community as it struggles to accommodate the tremendous changes being asked of it.

Despite these many challenges, however, a determination to succeed persists in the school. With a clearly defined vision and plan, strong leadership, support at every level, and much hard work the Curtis Corner Middle School community can move the school along on its journey of reform to become an effective and high-functioning middle school in which all students achieve the high levels of learning necessary for them to be successful in an increasingly complex world.

## 4. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING

### Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *reviewing completed and ongoing student work*
- ◆ *observing classes*
- ◆ *classroom textbooks*
- ◆ *talking with students, teachers, and department heads*
- ◆ *interviewing teachers about the work of their students*
- ◆ *meeting with students*
- ◆ *school placement test results: Nelson-Denny, Gates-MacGinitie, and Arlin Test of Formal Reasoning Abstract Thinking Test*

### Conclusions

Most students are self-motivated, cooperative, prepared, and ready to learn. They respect themselves, their peers, adults, and their environment. They monitor their own behavior, are adaptable, and conduct themselves responsibly. Students are eager to connect their prior knowledge and personal experiences to their learning. (*following students, observing classes*)

Many students at Curtis Corner Middle School are effective writers. They write frequently and for a variety of purposes across the content areas. Students capably use steps to develop, edit, and revise their writing, which often includes lengthy pieces. Their writing generally includes the correct use of conventions. (*following students, observing classes, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, meeting with students, talking with teachers, interviewing teachers about the work of their students*)

Most students read well enough to write short summaries or journal responses to demonstrate their understanding of the text. They often select from a variety of teacher-designed projects, which they complete. Most students read well enough to find information in textbooks, keep notebooks, and follow directions on teacher-generated materials. Some students have begun to use the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review) technique to read and understand textbook material. They write questions to guide their textbook reading and to measure their own understanding. The use of all of these strategies helps students better to understand what they read, but these strategies alone will not promote students' ability to become critical readers. (*following students, observing classes, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, talking with students, teachers, and department heads*)

Many students at Curtis Corner Middle School are proficient in basic math skills and are able to use calculators responsibly. Students routinely complete math computation worksheets, take notes, and complete textbook problems that require basic math skills. Some students demonstrate basic understanding of how to solve math problems, but few regularly engage in solving complex problems. Few students exhibit a firm understanding of the underlying mathematical concepts. Many students work well within small groups, solving simple problems and sharing answers with one another. Many can clearly explain to their peers how they solved the problem and which

basic mathematical operations they used. *(following students, observing classes, classroom textbooks, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, talking with students and teachers, interviewing teachers about the work of their students, school placement test results: Nelson-Denny, Gates-MacGinitie and Arlin Test of Formal Reasoning Abstract Thinking Test)*

## Commendations for Curtis Corner Middle School

Highly respectful students

Student eagerness to learn

Students who make responsible choices

## Recommendations for Curtis Corner Middle School

Empower students as learners by providing more opportunities for them to make responsible choices in their learning.

Continue to provide students with opportunities that will further develop their writing skills. Make those experiences available to all students.

Frequently engage all students in complex problem solving and concept building activities across the curriculum.

Provide all students with more reading opportunities that will help them develop and apply critical reading skills.

## 5. FINDINGS ON TEACHING

### Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *observing classes*
- ◆ *talking with students, teachers, and school administrator*
- ◆ *interviewing teachers about the work of their students*
- ◆ *reviewing school improvement plan*
- ◆ *meeting with school improvement team and students*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *reviewing completed and ongoing student work*

### Conclusions

Teachers at Curtis Corner Middle School are at the beginning stage of using standards in their classrooms. They display standards that are relevant to their content area on their classroom walls. Some teachers identify for students the specific standards for lessons and also incorporate these standards into the planning and delivery of their instruction. Most students are aware of the standards. Most teachers have begun to evaluate student work using criteria sheets and rubrics. A few teachers display models of student work that meet or exceed the standard. These are positive first steps towards moving all students to increased learning. (*following students, observing classes, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, interviewing teachers about the work of their students, talking with students, teachers, and school administrator, reviewing school improvement plan*)

Although individual teachers at Curtis Corner Middle School display a strong commitment to the subject they teach, this singular focus presents some obstacles to their becoming a fully collaborative and vital middle school community. Their ultimate challenge is to regain a focus on student learning in the midst of the messy, uncertain process of continuous change. (*following students, observing classes, talking with students and teachers*)

Many teachers have students work in pairs or small groups to share information, revise their writing, conduct experiments in science, examine primary sources in social studies, and practice athletic skills in physical education classes. These activities provide peer-learning opportunities for students. (*following students, observing classes, talking with students, meeting with students*)

Most teachers assign students within a classroom the same work to complete, even though their students have diverse learning needs. Teachers readily identify that they need effective, continuous, and intensive professional development in differentiation of instruction in order better to meet the needs of all students. (*interviewing teachers about the work of their students, following students, observing classes, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, meeting with school improvement team*)

Some teachers challenge students by engaging them in solving real-world problems together. Too often, however, teachers direct the learning activities in their classrooms through whole group lessons, during which time they provide information to the whole class and then call on individual students to answer specific questions. Over reliance on this strategy results in many students listening passively for much of the class, instead of being actively engaged. (*following students, observing classes, meeting with students, reviewing completed and ongoing student*

*work)*

## Commendation for Curtis Corner Middle School

Teachers who recognize their own professional development needs

## Recommendations for Curtis Corner Middle School

Participate in more extensive and ongoing professional development in the following areas: team teaching, differentiated instruction, standards-based instruction, and cooperative learning strategies. Incorporate what you learn in all classes.

Engage all students in increasingly challenging learning experiences to better prepare them for a complex, highly technological society.

Build on the small group activities that are already in place by incorporating student-driven inquiry learning for all students.

## Recommendation for the South Kingstown School Department

Demonstrate a strong commitment to Curtis Corner Middle School. Provide the appropriate resources.

## 6. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL

### Sources of Evidence

- ◆ *observing classes*
- ◆ *observing the school outside of the classroom*
- ◆ *talking with students, teachers, and C.A.R.E.S. coordinator*
- ◆ *interviewing teachers about the work of their students*
- ◆ *meeting with school and district administrators, school improvement team, parents, and students*
- ◆ *following students*
- ◆ *reviewing school improvement plan*
- ◆ *Curtis Corner Middle School Information binder*
- ◆ *reviewing Turning Points*
- ◆ *Curtis Corner school bulletin board*
- ◆ *Management Needs Assessment January 8, 2002*
- ◆ *examining school schedule*
- ◆ *Providence Journal, South County Independent, and Narragansett Times news articles*
- ◆ *reviewing South Kingstown School Department District Strategic Plan 2002-2006*
- ◆ *Curtis Corner Middle School Student Planner*
- ◆ *S.M.I.L.E. (Science & Math Investigative Learning Experiences) brochure*
- ◆ *C.A.R.E.S. (Connecting All Resources for Educational Support) binder*
- ◆ *Curtis Corner daily announcements*

### Conclusions

The school improvement plan at Curtis Corner Middle School is inappropriate for this new middle school. Collaboratively developed by members of the former junior high school community, this plan includes only one tactic, out of five, that addresses specific middle school characteristics. The plan (and its implementation by the

school improvement team) does not reflect a complete self-study, nor does it include ways to assess the achievement of the action steps. The school plan is not reflected in the district plan, and the faculty has not formally adopted it. The present school improvement plan is more of an outline of the past, than it is a blueprint for future action. It cannot help this school move forward in its effort to become a middle school in which all students achieve high levels of learning. *(meeting with school improvement team, parents, school and district administrators, reviewing school improvement plan, reviewing South Kingstown School Department District Strategic Plan 2002-2006, talking with teachers)*

Several middle level structures are already in place at Curtis Corner Middle School that provide a foundation on which the school can build. As part of the reorganization of the school the sixth grade was brought into the building from the elementary schools. With the exception of the science lab classrooms, teachers on the same team have been assigned classrooms in the same part of the building. Students are grouped into heterogeneous teams. Daily common team time for teachers is provided in the schedule. Some teams have begun to use these structures to share and plan together. Classes necessary for middle level endorsement have been offered to teachers on site along with minimal training in teaming and the differentiation of instruction. *(observing the school outside the classroom, talking with teachers, meeting with school administrator and school improvement team, following students, reviewing Turning Points, Curtis Corner Information binder)*

Students at Curtis Corner are exposed to a multitude of unified arts classes. However, the unified arts teachers, along with the special education teachers, reading specialists, and the foreign language teacher, do not share team time with the core academic teachers. The structure of the current schedule greatly limits the equitable integration of these areas into the core subject areas. With an improved schedule that includes all teachers in core team planning time teachers can increase the learning connections and reduce the fragmentation in their teaching, which would increase student learning. *(following students, observing classes, examining school schedule, reviewing Turning Points, talking with students and teachers)*

The school demonstrates a desire to maintain a caring and nurturing environment for its students by offering a wide variety of extracurricular athletic and interest-oriented clubs and activities that appeal to students' diverse interests. A strong adult volunteer and student-mentoring program (C.A.R.E.S.) also provides educational support for students. Including varied activities for students is important in a good middle level program. *(Curtis Corner school bulletin board, Curtis Corner Middle School Student Planner, meeting with parents and students, talking with teachers and C.A.R.E.S. coordinator, Curtis Corner daily announcements, S.M.I.L.E. brochure, C.A.R.E.S. binder)*

Vacancies in key administrative positions at this time, including three of the four district administrators, the impending retirement of the superintendent, the sudden resignation of the assistant principal in the school, as well as the official announcement of the departure of the school's first year principal, have tremendously impeded Curtis Corner Middle School's ability to function as a middle school. Additional challenges to its first year as a middle school include: hosting a SALT visit, as requested by the district superintendent; dealing with major scheduling problems; enduring budgetary difficulties; struggling with communication problems between and among all stakeholders; teaching with no written middle school curriculum; and dealing with the daily challenges of meeting the needs of young adolescents. *(meeting with school and district administrators, parents, and students, interviewing teachers about the work of their students, talking with students and teachers, Curtis Corner Middle School Information binder, Management Needs Assessment January 8, 2002, Providence Journal, South County Independent, and Narragansett Times news articles)*

## Commendation for Curtis Corner Middle School

The number and scope of extra-curricular activities at Curtis Corner Middle School

## Recommendations for Curtis Corner Middle School

Establish and maintain clear channels of open and frank communication throughout the school and district that includes all stakeholders.

Continue to build the school improvement team so that it equitably reflects the entire school community.

Engage in conversations to share beliefs and values. Develop and adopt a shared vision. Commit to it.

Conduct an intensive self-study that includes an in-depth analysis of student work and teaching practices. Using the information you gather, develop and write a school improvement plan that will serve as a guide for the continuous improvement of learning and teaching at Curtis Corner Middle School.

Continue to work on improving the schedule. Identify staffing needs to create a flexible schedule that will allow teams to experiment with student grouping and to better utilize instruction time. Learn to use team time effectively.

## Recommendations for South Kingstown School Department

Honestly engage in strategic planning to provide the best middle level educational opportunities for your ten-to fourteen-year-olds. Articulate that plan throughout the community in support of your school leaders and to demonstrate your continued commitment to school improvement at Curtis Corner Middle School.

In your search for a new administrative team for Curtis Corner Middle School continue to focus on candidates who are grounded in middle school philosophy.

Develop for and deliver to Curtis Corner Middle School a comprehensive standards-based curriculum.

## Recommendation for South Kingstown School Committee

Continue to support the efforts to attract, hire, and retain quality, experienced administrators in your search for a new administrative team.

## 7. Final Advice to the School

Curtis Corner Middle School must engage all stakeholders in frank discussions about its teaching and learning beliefs and values in order to establish a shared vision for this new middle school. Everyone must become an active participant in the efforts of school improvement. Work with and support one another as you learn together and as you move all of your students forward.

Involve yourselves in an intensive self-study of the learning and teaching that occur here. Focus together on current student work to determine what your students know and what they are able to do. Closely examine your teaching practices to measure your strengths and weaknesses. Use what you learn from your self-study as the base for developing a school improvement plan that will serve as your guide to improvement.

Take risks to empower each other and your students to become partners in learning.

## The Curtis Corner Middle School Improvement Team

Susan Burt  
Teacher/Co-Chair of SIT

Diane Kern  
Parent/Co-Chair of SIT

Michelle Brousseau-Cavallaro  
Parent

Nancy Burroughs  
Parent

Tonda Daniels  
Parent

Karen Discuillo  
Teacher

Kristen Gaudreau  
Teacher

Dr. Santa T. Iadevaia  
Principal

John Mulroy  
Parent

Dr. Don Smith  
Teacher

Martha Smith  
Parent

Lynn Vesce  
Parent

Ashley weeks  
Teacher

Ella Whaley  
Parent/School Committee

## The SALT Visit Team

Sandra L. Olson  
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Michael J. Allen  
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Ginamarie Masiello  
Grade 6 Math Teacher  
Governor Christopher DelSesto Middle School  
Providence, Rhode Island

Barbara E. Miller  
Principal  
Babcock Middle School  
Westerly, Rhode Island

Elizabeth D. Peirce  
School Counselor  
Archie Cole Junior High School  
East Greenwich, Rhode Island

## Endorsement of SALT Visit Team Report

### **Curtis Corner Middle School**

April 26, 2002

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, discussed all concerns raised by the principal during the visit and reviewed those raised after, 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, 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.  
May 22, 2002: