

PONAGANSET MIDDLE SCHOOL

District, Rhode Island

A REPORT TO THE SCHOOL

PREPARED BY THE SALT VISITING TEAM

April 1997

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1. INTRODUCTION: THIS REPORT'S PURPOSE AND LIMITS

The purpose of the visit to Ponaganset Middle School during the week of April 28, 1997 was to draw conclusions about the School in these three areas: Student learning, progress and achievement; Teaching and learning; The school as a learning community. The goal of this visit was to ensure that school-based accountability leads to student improvement. This is the most important aspect of SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching).

The “Taking Stock” report, which the principal and faculty prepared for the visit, served as the Team’s first touchstone in coming to an understanding of Ponaganset Middle School. The Team based its conclusions on the analysis of the evidence it collected during the three day visit. This visit included 134 lengthy classroom observations, as well as interviews and discussions with teachers, administrators, students and parents. Shadowing a student for a day; reviewing school documents and records; reading the “Taking Stock” report; and analyzing the standardized test scores in detail helped the team further.

All of the conclusions, recommendations and commendations in this report were agreed to by Team consensus, following in depth discussions that considered the evidence from the visit.

Members of the visiting team, whose names and affiliations are included in Appendix A, are middle school teachers and administrators and parents of 10-14 year-olds.

This report is limited by the fact that it is a prototype. As such, there is no historical data upon which to draw. This report reflects a moment in time on the continuum of the educational process. This is new methodology and the first time, ever, in this state that such an effort has been made. The community of Ponaganset Middle School is to be recognized and congratulated for their leadership in this process.

However informative charts and graphs may be, there is simply no substitute for being there – in the classroom, in the lunchroom, in the schoolyard. The specific information generated by an actual on-site visit, with students and staff, parents and administrators going about their day, is not only focused to help improve schools, but to place that information within a larger context that gives it meaning at that

site. Thus, a visit allows a colleague to live through a teaching event with the teacher, to find common ground, and to form judgments that will result in support strategies for teaching and learning.

On the following pages, the specific focus areas are laid out, each with their own introductory sections. These introductions explain the methodology and present the Team's conclusions about the whole performance in each area. The commendations and recommendations that follow from the conclusions are then presented.

2. OVERVIEW OF TEAM'S FINDINGS

Profile of the School

Ponaganset Middle School is a regional middle school for children in grades six through eight who are residents of the rural towns of Foster and Glocester. Each of these communities has its own elementary school district with a school board elected by the citizens of the town and an independent administrative department for governance. The school board for the consolidated district which provides education at grades six and above is elected by the citizens of the two towns.

The 671 students who attend Ponaganset are organized into academic teams arranged heterogeneously by grade level. They stay with this team for their core subjects and then select electives from the Encore or elective subjects. There are 57 classroom teachers at Ponaganset Middle School as well as two administrators and seven additional full or part-time staff members.

The Ponaganset Middle School operates on a seven period day with no bells. The teams are free to reschedule their academic offerings as need arises. The library and computer room are flexibly scheduled. Both rooms are staffed throughout the day. The library houses nearly 11,000 volumes and there are over 100 computers in both the lab and in classrooms.

One of Rhode Island's first Carnegie Schools, Ponaganset Middle School has worked with the Turning Points principles as a guide for middle level education over the last six years. Ponaganset Middle School is also a member of the New England League of Middle Schools and is a recipient of the Rhode Island Blue Ribbon School Award.

Portrait of the Condition of Ponaganset Middle School at the Time of the Visit

Ponaganset Middle School is one of Rhode Island's first Carnegie Schools. The faculty, staff and administrators have worked hard to ensure that the principles of Turning Points have real meaning for

them, for what they do and for what they are about.

Since becoming a Carnegie School, Ponaganset Middle School has made major accomplishments in providing quality education for all of its students. As a result of this hard work, they have built a springboard on which they are poised. They are a good middle school with much evidence of effort in wrestling with what it takes to be in that enviable position. Now, with the “Taking Stock” report, the Carnegie Self-Study report and the results of this visit, they will be able to continue to push for excellence in all that they do.

Fueled by their demonstrated passion for teaching and learning, for student accomplishments and for risk taking Ponaganset Middle School can now move forward with their students into a new day. They took a risk – they opened their doors, their files, their records. Through the eyes of the Visitation Team, this report highlights how good middle level practices may become even better.

3. FINDINGS ON STUDENT LEARNING, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

To form conclusions in the area of student learning, progress and achievement, the Visitation Team identified three issues. First, the grade eight state assessment results for the school since 1989 were analyzed, paying particular attention to the question of whether or not the scores have remained flat. Second, the Visitation Team focused on whether the school effectively used both state assessment information as well as the results of their own assessments. Third, the Team looked at how the Rhode Island Department of Education could be used as a resource for this process.

Conclusions

Based upon an initial analysis of grade eight state assessment results, Ponaganset Middle School student scores are not flat but have been rising in both math and reading since 1993. Indeed, the difference between the state median and the school’s scores shows that it is widening in a positive direction.

As indicated through faculty discussions and the “Taking Stock” report, Ponaganset Middle School is not effectively using the state assessment results. The grade four results are used primarily to place sixth graders in heterogeneous groups as well as to validate other educational decisions. The eighth grade scores are used for high school placement.

There is evidence of the use of a variety of assessments of student performance: portfolios, journals, teacher developed tests, student developed tests and exhibitions. There is, however, no school wide, systemic program of alternative assessment that connects the assessment to the improvement of student learning.

Commendations

Through their work on standards, Ponaganset Middle School recognizes the need to address the gap between what their students now know and are able to do and what their students need to know and be able to do.

Based upon the 1995 state assessment data, the following observations are relevant:

- 74% of the children are scoring average or high on the state assessment in math
- 68% of the children are scoring average or high on the state assessment in reading
- 73% of the children are scoring average or high on the state assessment in writing

There is considerable evidence of good quality writing across the curriculum and throughout the school.

The music program has a high quality of student engagement and effectively uses real performance for motivation. Its emphasis on student responsibility and skill development may provide an approach for expanding performance assessment.

There is evidence that individual teachers are beginning to use alternative assessments aligned with standards to help close the gaps in student performance.

During classroom visits there was much evidence of clearly stated and understood standards for student performance.

Recommendations for Improvement

Faculty groups should use grade eight achievement data in ways that help them understand the effects of the school's teaching on its students. Faculty from all grades should think together about the implications of these scores for teaching and learning at Ponaganset Middle School by breaking out the data in ways that show interesting patterns or puzzles.

For example:

There are higher percentages of students at low levels of reading and mathematics at the middle school (grade eight) than there are at Foster and Glocester (at grade four). When and how does this happen?

Since between a quarter and a third of Ponaganset Middle School students are at low levels of reading (below the 40th percentile) and mathematics at grade eight, the faculty should look at commonalities in this group – for example is there a similarity in their instructional history? Are the students all from a particular socio-economic group? In addition, were there changes in the demographics of Foster and Glocester or were there changes in district or state policies or funding that may have impacted those students and scores?

There is evidence in the last three years of a marked improvement in mathematics compared to the state average. The school should investigate changes in mathematics instruction and its implications for future instructional decisions.

Overall, faculty should take a proactive stance in viewing the data, ask questions about it and set targets for future performance. The results of the Carnegie self-study should be included in this analysis.

Encourage faculty on a school wide basis to design and use, in a meaningful way, assessments of student performance that are aligned to their standards. Use the resident expertise found at Ponaganset Middle School to help colleagues develop alternative assessments that are aligned with curriculum standards.

Employ the expertise found at the Rhode Island Department of Education in order to more effectively use student performance data from the State Assessment Program.

4. FINDINGS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching) is based upon the premise that the purpose of school accountability is to improve teaching and learning. Therefore, the majority of our time was spent in classrooms -- nearly every teacher was visited and over 134 classroom observations were made. No classroom visit was less than fifteen minutes in length and more than 70% of these visits were for the entire teaching period. Supplementing these observations, were focused interviews and conversations with students, parents, district administrators, as well as a review of internal documents, including the Taking Stock report. The conclusions presented here are built upon thorough team discussion and consensus. Using evidence from direct observation and examination of student work the Visitation Team offers the following:

Conclusions

The teaching and learning at Ponaganset Middle School is of a high caliber. This is a direct result of the deliberate effort and hard work on the part of teachers, staff, administrators, and students.

Teachers have created an environment in which students are becoming self-directed, motivated, responsible learners. Students are supported in their inquiries and are free to learn from their mistakes. Teachers have a firm grasp of effective instructional practices and use a wide repertoire of strategies to meet the diverse needs of students. Teachers are thoughtful about their practice and committed to professional growth.

There is still work to be done if all students, in all grades, across all teams are to achieve at high levels.

Commendations

Teachers provide many opportunities for students to work cooperatively with their peers to enhance their learning.

Student work shows strong evidence of positive study habits.

Students are offered many ways to show what they know and what they can do.

Rubrics developed by teachers and students are used effectively across the curriculum.

Classrooms are visually appealing and conducive to learning.

Teachers make effective use of the teachable moment.

The Assertive Discipline Policy is embedded in the teaching and learning process -- allowing teachers to teach and students to learn.

Recommendations for Improvement

Spread the good practices more evenly throughout the school by using more effectively the resident expertise within the faculty. This should be a part of an on going school-based program of professional development.

Find additional time for teachers to work together to plan curriculum and talk about their teaching. Be sure to include Encore (elective) teachers in this new design.

Review the possibility for further integration of those special needs students who are currently in more

restrictive settings and consider using a noncompetitive approach to grading to facilitate individual success.

Put in place a teacher evaluation process that supports teachers in their efforts to improve practice.

5. FINDINGS ON THE SCHOOL AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY

To consider the issue of Ponaganset Middle School as a community of learners, the team the team listened, read, and met in structured conversations.

Conclusions

Ponaganset Middle School expects that all members of the school community will be productive, respectful and responsible.

While the band, music and sports provide a central focus for many students, there are other students who need additional opportunities for motivation. Social outlets need to be developed that offer alternative activities to engage and ignite unmotivated students.

Ponaganset Middle School employs a clear and consistent disciplinary system that is understood and supported by all members of the school's community.

The community provides good support and the school is a responsible steward of these resources.

Commendations

There is strong evidence of great rapport among students and teachers and staff.

Student work is valued as evidenced by the displays throughout the building.

Students are uniformly respectful and exhibit strong signs of belonging to a purposeful community. They are living proof of the vitality of Ponaganset's Mission Statement.

There is a strong sense of community as evidenced by a positive, nurturing and supportive environment.

District and building administrators know the students well.

The building administrators provide an educational environment where good middle level practices may flourish.

Individual teachers take extra care to ensure that the well being of students is at the center of the schools focus.

Recommendations for Improvement

Review more effective ways of providing each student with consistent adult support and interaction.

Develop an integrated Technology Plan aimed to strengthen and support instruction.

Find ways to more fully integrate Library resources to better support instruction.

Provide vehicles for greater communication with parents and family.

Increase opportunities for greater student voice.

Clarify the purpose of your School Improvement Team -- meet more regularly and increase effectiveness by including parents and students.

Expand communication about existing social services already in place.

Develop a sense of community across grades.

Tap parent/community talents – take advantage of the willingness and expertise of families to become more actively involved in the life of the school.

Provide more social opportunities that respond to and recognize diverse student needs.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Ponaganset Middle School is a good school that is looking to become a great school. The evidence clearly shows that many of the pieces to achieve this are already in place -- positive learning environment, good test scores, a committed and caring faculty, and a strong sense of community which cherishes what they are doing. The school has the Carnegie Turning Points, the “Taking Stock” report, and soon, the results of the Carnegie self-study. Now, the report of the Visiting Team may be added to these documents. Use all of this as other resources in the past have been used -- to leap into the future

both purposefully and thoughtfully so that all Ponaganset has been will only get better.

Most Important Commendations

The most important commendation from the Visitation Team is focused on the area of writing. Everyone at Ponaganset Middle School writes -- they write about math, they write about science, they write about what they did yesterday, and what they will do tomorrow. Everyone keeps a journal. This is a wonderful process that must be continued. Writing is a highly idiosyncratic process that varies from day to day. Variance is the norm, not the exception. Good teaching enhances even greater variation. The more risks a writer takes and the more tools at the writer's disposal to carry out an audacious intention, the more the writing will vary in quality. Writing here does vary and writers can grow here. Continue to nurture these writers. When teachers and their students write together and collaborate they forge and inhabit a common ground where the logic of learning and teaching can finally converge and become one.

Most Important Recommendations

Ponaganset Middle School has a cadre of highly skilled, highly trained professionals. Use them. Draw them into discussions that focus on what is happening here at Ponaganset Middle School. Empower all teachers to take creative control of the professional development area and link that to greater involvement with assessment, with standards and with student performance.

The "Taking Stock" report raises the issue of the unmotivated student. Meetings with parents, administrators and structured conversations with students and teachers raised similar concerns about the student who lacks focus. There are many adults in the Ponaganset community who have a strong rapport with students. These include classroom teachers and Encore (elective) teachers as well as administrators and support staff. Use this rapport as the basis for developing stronger relationships with those unmotivated or unfocused students. Parents are an untapped resource in this domain. Think about how you can create within the school day, within the teams, a way to assist these students with decision making about all aspects of their lives. The goal is that each student have an adult whom the student believes is personally concerned about his or her growth and welfare. This would help the student to make the transition to adolescence and independence.

Look critically at assessment at Ponaganset Middle School. Take a proactive stance with data from standardized tests and employ the expertise found within the Rhode Island Department of Education to channel your deliberations in this area. The analysis completed as a part of this visit indicates that scores from the State Assessment Program are relatively high and that trend is continuing (see Appendix B). Overall there is a high level of student performance. Identify the factors that contribute to this effect and to the extent possible duplicate these to allow even more students to achieve at high levels.

APPENDIX A

MEMBERS OF THE VISITATION TEAM

Alice Carlan, Parent, Warwick

Diane Devine, Rhode Island Department of Education

Chris Cuthbertson, Teacher, UCAP, Providence

Maureen Meyers, Teacher, Coventry Middle School, Coventry

Susan Rotblat-Walker, Rhode Island Department of Education

*MaryKay Schnare, Teacher, Nathan Bishop Middle School, Providence

John Short, Principal, Nathaniel Green Middle School, Providence

Kathy Suriani, Teacher, Jenks Junior High, Pawtucket

Thomas Wilson, Principal Consultant, SALT

*Indicates Chair of the Visitation Team

The Visitation Team would like to give special thanks to Francis A. Richards of the Rhode Island Department of Education for his invaluable assistance during the Visitation and the writing of this report.