

REPORT FROM THE
COMMISSIONER'S VISIT TO
Central Falls High School
Central Falls, RI



Visit Conducted on:
April 29 & 30, 2009

The purpose of the Commissioner's Visit to Central Falls High School was to provide useful information to help the school improve the learning and teaching of literacy. The visit focused on the following questions:

How well do students read and write and use reading and writing as tools to learn?

How well are teachers helping students to become proficient readers and writers who use reading and writing as tools to learn?

How well does the school and district leadership support teacher efforts to make all students proficient readers and writers who use reading and writing as tools to learn?

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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSIONER'S VISIT TO ELLA RISK SCHOOL

I. BACKGROUND OF THE VISIT

On April 29 and 30, 2009, a team of educators led by the District Visit Team from the Rhode Island Department of Education conducted a Commissioner's Visit to Central Falls High School in the Central Falls (RI) School District. This visit specifically focused on learning and teaching practices related to literacy. The Commissioner's Visit Team consisted of members from RIDE, from within the district and from outside the district. The team members for this visit were:

Thomas Kenworthy – RIDE (Team Chair)
Rick Richards – RIDE
Barbara Halzel – Central Falls School District
Claire Pollard - Central Falls School District
Pat Morris - Central Falls School District
Edda Carmadello - Central Falls School District
Jane Sessums - Central Falls School District
Cathy Carvalho - Central Falls School District
Michael Bento - Central Falls School District
Donald Labossiere - Central Falls School District
Patricia Bellini - Central Falls School District
Ron DiOrio - Central Falls School District/University of Rhode Island
Susan Toohey Kaye - RIDE
Andre Audette – RIDE
Maria Velasquez – RIDE
Mary Canole – Johnson & Wales University
Paula Santos – West Warwick High School
Joann Angelini – Literacy Consultant for the Central Falls School District

The Commissioner's Visit focused on learning and teaching practices related to literacy, that is reading and writing, across all classrooms, content areas and grade levels. The focus questions that guided this team's inquiry were:

- 1) How well do students read and write and use reading and writing as tools to learn?
- 2) How well are teachers helping students to become proficient readers and writers who use reading and writing as tools to learn?
- 3) How well does the school and district leadership support teacher efforts to make all students proficient readers and writers who use reading and writing as tools to learn?

The visiting team spent two school days conducting its inquiry. During this time, each team member: shadowed one student for the morning of the first day and observed learning from that student's perspective; observed classrooms throughout all grade levels and content areas focusing specifically on learning and teaching practices related to literacy; talked with students and staff members throughout the day; attended meetings to gain the perspective of

students, parents, teachers, and school administrators and School Improvement Team members; and, spent five hours in direct deliberation time in the team room developing conclusions based upon this inquiry. The team developed its conclusions in three main areas: student learning, teaching for learning and school and district support for learning and teaching. These conclusions are presented in the sections that follow.

II. LITERACY PROFILE PREPARED BY CENTRAL FALLS HIGH SCHOOL

Central Falls High School is a comprehensive public school, grades nine through twelve. The student body consists of approximately 850 students, 167 of whom are seniors. The school is centrally located in the multi-ethnic urban City of Central Falls (population: 19,000). Central Falls High School is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and by the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Central Falls High School is a standards-driven teaching and learning community that promotes literacy in languages, mathematics, natural and social sciences, the arts, and technology. It fosters effective communication, problem solving, critical thinking, civic responsibility, and the skills necessary for living and working in a culturally diverse society.

Central Falls High School is a University of Rhode Island Academy. This partnership between the two academic institutions provides multiple benefits to students. These benefits include, but are not limited to, dual-enrollment at the University of Rhode Island, an in-school Academic Enhancement Center, and a team of university-based staff and tutors that work with students to develop inter-institutional collaborative efforts.

At Central Falls High School, students are engaged in meaningful, rigorous, and diverse learning activities designed to prepare them for further education and successful careers. In order to graduate from the school, each student must provide evidence that he or she has achieved and demonstrated all six of the Essential Learner Outcomes listed as follows:

- Self-direction
- Creative problem-solving
- Effective communication
- Skillful use of technology
- Responsible community membership
- Arts support and/or performance

Central Falls High School is divided into an Upper House (11th and 12th grades) and a Lower House (9th and 10th grades). During the 2008-2009 academic year, Upper House students took 8 courses per academic year, and Lower House students took 6 courses per academic year. In the Upper House, courses are taught on a year-long block schedule, with 4 courses per day, meeting alternate days.

Academic progress of Central Falls High School students is assessed in a variety of ways known as the Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements (PBGR). All students must show proficiency in Essential Learning Outcomes as reflected in specific tasks defined by the six core content areas including Mathematics, English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, Arts, and Technology.

A student must also have a Graduation Portfolio in order to receive a high school diploma. Portfolios consist of assignments from 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, as well as a Summative Reflection written in 12th grade explaining the student's work and plans after high school. Students defend their portfolios during the second half of the year before a Graduation Portfolio Review Committee comprised of administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and community members.

III. FINDINGS OF THE COMMISSIONER'S VISIT TEAM

Student Learning

Inquiry Focus Question: How well do students read and write and use reading and writing as tools to learn?

Students read at varying levels of proficiency throughout the school. Many students read with good fluency, including some of those for whom English is not their first language. Some other students at all grade levels struggle with comprehension and/or do not consistently provide details about what they have read when asked.

Most students report that they like to read and many value the importance of reading with proficiency. Overall, students do not read as much for pleasure outside of school compared to what they read for class. Some students report that they do not get enough opportunities to read genres that they enjoy in school. Other students report that they would like more choice in what they read and feel more ownership in their work when they have that choice.

Students write in almost all classes across all grade levels. In English/Language Arts, students write in both dialectic and reader response journals. In math, students write to justify answers when solving problems. In science, students write lab reports and in many science classes they write extensively in science notebooks. In some social studies classes, students read and then interpret primary source materials in various forms of writing. In other classes, including art and music, students work collaboratively in groups and with partners to brainstorm ideas for writing pieces related to class assignments. Throughout all of these classes the quality of student writing varies, with some students writing proficiently and others not writing well enough.

In almost all classes, students copy notes from the board and use graphic organizers to summarize their thinking. Almost all students can complete these tasks with little assistance

and many eagerly await opportunities to discuss this information with peers. Most students work productively when given these opportunities and many then take a more active role in their learning.

Some students are able to enhance their understanding of what they read and write with the use of technology. Many students enjoy using technology to further their research and to complete projects. A few students report that school is the only place where they have access to technology to support their learning.

Teaching for Learning

Inquiry Focus Question: How well are teachers helping students to become proficient readers and writers who use reading and writing as tools to learn?

Literacy strategies promoted and supported by district professional development are clearly in use across all content areas throughout the school. These include reader responses, plot relationship charts, reciprocal teaching and many other literacy strategies. In addition, Socratic seminars and fishbowls are in wide-spread use to improve student skills and enhance learning. These strategies are used with varied degrees of success and result in different levels of student engagement. In those classes where the strategies work well, teachers use techniques to ensure that all students are actively involved in the learning process.

There are a variety of instructional settings used throughout the school to meet the literacy needs of all students. In inclusion classrooms, teachers often use a team teaching approach to deliver instruction to students. In many of these classrooms, the instruction is seamless and it is often hard to distinguish between general and special educators. To varying degrees of implementation, self-contained teachers support literacy through a print rich environment and the skill-building instruction they provide for students. Many ESL and special education teachers appropriately break down and scaffold lessons to meet student proficiency levels in reading and writing.

There are examples of teachers using differentiated literacy instruction to meet the varied needs of their students. In addition, many teachers engage students with probing questions and make real world connections. Many also further meet the needs of students through conferencing, providing individual attention as needed and continually assessing for understanding. Commendably many teachers give freely of their time to provide academic support and advisement.

Some teachers throughout all grade levels rely too heavily on teacher-directed instruction which often does not meet the varied interest and ability levels of their students. In these classes, many students were observed to be off task and disengaged from the learning process, doing work unrelated to the task at hand, texting on cell phones or sitting with their heads down for prolonged periods of time.

School and District Support for Learning and Teaching

Inquiry Focus Question: How well does the school and district leadership support teacher efforts to make all students proficient readers and writers who use reading and writing as tools to learn?

Throughout the school, literacy tools and strategies are clearly in use. Almost all classrooms have posted agendas, word walls and reading and writing strategies displayed throughout the room. In addition, many teachers begin lessons with warm up activities and close lessons with exit strategies that further enhance student reading and writing skills. As evidenced by the positive things teachers say about the new literacy practices, the foundation for a culture of literacy is in place and ready to be expanded.

There is a monitoring process in place to assess the effectiveness of reading and writing instructional practices. Formal teacher evaluations, regular learning strides, informal classroom observations and looking at student work all help to keep administrators informed of this progress. There is room for improvement in the use of this information, especially in combination with other sources of data. Some teachers report that at the beginning of the year the feedback they received was primarily negative and that monitoring had a “compliance” feel to it. Since January, they report that monitoring is much more of a process that works to build their professional learning community and this has resulted in accelerated improvement.

Some parents report that they are concerned with the level of support provided for struggling readers. They also believe that communication between home and school could be improved. Many of the parents who met with visit team members did not have information on academic and remediation programs in place to support students.

An abundant amount of literacy professional development has been provided for teachers over the past few years. Teachers have worked hard and the strategies learned in these modules are clearly in use throughout the school, although not with complete consistency or fidelity. While teachers appreciate and value this professional development, there is a widespread sentiment that too much has happened too quickly in the area of literacy. Many teachers report that they would like the time to digest and fully implement these strategies, particularly in content areas, as well as more time to collaborate and share best practices with colleagues. Team and academy leaders currently receive much more professional

development than other teachers and consequently have been taken away from instructional time more often.

While the current co-principal model has had some positive benefits for school culture, teachers feel that the structure is reinforcing the historical perception of administrator instability. There is concern that this instability will erode positive learning and teaching improvements that are in place, especially in the areas of reading and writing. It has also created a situation that tends to polarize the faculty.

Many students and teachers express the concern that student discipline is inconsistently handled or not addressed at all in some instances. There is concern that this is causing an erosion of the learning and teaching process.

The teaming and academy models that are being developed for the coming years show promise and have considerable support among students, teachers and administrators. However, the current model does not build in structural support for all content areas and ensure that they are adequately integrated across grade levels.

Because so many programs have been abruptly terminated, many teachers desire a formal program evaluation system to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses of programs are properly examined in the future before changes are made or new programs are implemented. Students share this concern.

The library has potential to play an important role in literacy programming and in support of the academies but this potential requires an infusion of resources to be realized. Students and teachers report that the library is currently the only place where they can access the technology they need. Even in the library, but especially throughout the rest of the school, technology needs to be upgraded and more is needed to support 21st century learning and teaching.

IV. NEXT STEPS

At the conclusion of the Commissioner's Visit, the visiting team met with the CFHS School Improvement Team to review the findings and discuss possible next steps that the school could use to move forward in improving learning and teaching related to literacy. The following items were generated from this meeting as possible next steps for the school:

- Take the time to celebrate as a learning community the accomplishments, successes and positive changes that have taken place over the past few years.
- Look for ways to upgrade technology to support 21st century learning and teaching, particularly in the school library.

- Review the interventions currently in place for struggling readers to ensure that programs are meeting the needs of all students.
- Provide professional development to more teachers outside of team and academy leaders. Look specifically for professional development to help teachers move from teacher-centered instructional approaches. Ensure that teachers have the necessary time to collaborate and share successes and best practices after implementing learned strategies.
- Continue to reach out to parents and expand home-to-school communication, be sure to capitalize on the beginning of the school year when more parents are engaged in what is happening at school.
- Define the co-principal roles and responsibilities and communicate these to staff. Ensure that all members of the CFHS community see this relationship as strong and collaborative with best interest of students in mind.
- Continue discussions on school-wide discipline and ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page for next year.

V. FINAL ADVICE FROM THE TEAM CHAIR

Thank you for the hospitality that was shown to the Commissioner’s Visit Team throughout the two days of our visit. The school was well prepared and students, staff and parents were all very accommodating. It was evident to the team that your school has undergone an intense change process that has restructured responsibilities, impacted teaching practices, changed curriculum and challenged many beliefs and values. It is just as evident that you still need more time, as a learning community, to have honest discussions as you process these changes. As you work to do this, stakeholders should view these changes, particularly the introduction of new teaching practices, as more powerful tools that can be used to help all students become proficient readers and writers. Take the time to celebrate your successes and accomplishments in building a school-wide culture of literacy. Be sure to take the time as well to have the conversations that need to take place and determine the best ways for your school to proceed. Recognize that your work is not finished as you continue to move forward in this charge. I wish you continued success in the future.