



Newport Public Schools

Findings and Recommendations
from the

Central Office Review

conducted in partnership with the
Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the
Rhode Island Department of Education

prepared by the



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

October 12, 2004

Why a Central Office Review?

A Preface by the Superintendent of Schools

Newport Public Schools clearly understands that this mission is easier said than done.

In an effort to truly achieve its mission and to implement an ongoing focus on continuous improvement, Newport School Department has engaged in many school-level internal and external assessments over the last four years. Each one of the district's nine schools participated in either a SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching) Process or an NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) Accreditation Process. These endeavors truly indicate the district's sincere willingness to undergo close scrutiny for the purpose of ultimately improving student achievement.

The assessment reports definitely pointed out the district's weaknesses and how the needs of certain students were clearly not being met. In addition, some of our schools' performance placed our district into the world of Progressive Support and Intervention and necessitated several face-to-face meetings at the Rhode Island Department of Education. After initial denial and hurt feelings, we began to look at ourselves through that very critical external lens and realize we had to do things differently if our students were ever going to reach high levels of achievement. These reports and meetings serve as a catalyst for ongoing change in our schools as we move forward in meeting the needs of all of our learners.

After having each school undergo an external review process, it made sense to scrutinize the support system offered to our schools by the district central office. It is the belief of current central office administrators that central office's first priority is to support the schools. Central office articulates the common vision for the district and aligns district resources to support each school. Those at the building level, however, can best identify what they need. Additional support needs to be directed to those schools in the district that are most in need. It is important for us to take a hard look at what we do. Do we help or hinder school improvement?

The Central Office Review process was a logical next step for Newport Public Schools. This process promised to clearly equip us with the tools to better define a system of focused support for our nine schools.

The Mission of Newport Public Schools in partnership with students, families, and the community is to provide a challenging education with appropriate supports so that all students will possess the knowledge, skills, and character essential to productive citizenship, life long learning, and the ability to adapt successfully in a rapidly changing world.

Newport Public Schools would like to personally thank the members of the Annenberg Institute Team and the Assistant Commissioner of Education, David Abbott, Esq., for making the COR process available to Newport. In addition, we wish to express our gratitude to the members of the Central Office Review Team and to the students, parents, community members, teachers, and administrators who participated in the many interviews and focus groups.

Mary Canole
Superintendent

October 2004

Central Office Review

In fall 2003, Newport Public Schools entered into partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (see Appendix A) and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to conduct a Central Office Review. The review process was developed by the Annenberg Institute's School Communities that Work Task Force to help school districts examine the ways in which their central offices provide leadership and support for the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. The review is designed to determine

- the current state of student results;
- the effectiveness of central office policies and practices in relation to those results; and
- appropriate action steps to take that can strengthen central office capacity for supporting school improvement.

This process is conducted *in collaboration with* a district and its community. It is not an audit, a consultant report, an external review, or any other practice commonly done to districts. The process is guided and carried out by a Central Office Review Team composed of various district stakeholders who collect and organize data to inform a set of findings about central office practice.

The COR Process in Newport

The team that conducted the Central Office Review in Newport consisted of representatives of the school committee, community-based organizations, school faculties and administration, parent groups, central office personnel, RIDE, and the Annenberg Institute (the list of team members appears in Appendix B). The team developed findings based on a limited review of state and district data, brief visits to each of the district's schools, and a series of focus groups and interviews. The purpose of the data gathering was to

- illuminate the area chosen for study;
- articulate what is known now from multiple perspectives;
- identify what remains to be known; and
- lay the groundwork for planning and acting on this collective knowledge to improve supports for teaching and learning.

(see District Context, Appendix D)

As its area of study, the Newport Central Office Review Team selected *accelerated academic, linguistic, and cultural supports for students*, with particular emphasis on those practices that support the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Examples of such supports include curriculum frameworks based on content standards and professional development and guidance related to literacy instruction. Various members of the Review Team conducted the document reviews, focus groups, and interviews; the findings were sorted and organized by Annenberg Institute staff. An outline of the work of the Review Team appears in Appendix C.

Data-gathering activities took place from December 2003 to April 2004. Initially, the data gathered through the focus groups, interviews, and document reviews fell into five primary categories:

- Communication within the schools and with families and the community
- Personalization of supports for teaching and learning
- Resource distribution, providing both fiscal and human resources where most needed
- Collaboration among educators and with community partners
- Data-informed decision-making, particularly in measuring the progress of students and schools and in assessing the effectiveness of programs

The Annenberg Institute staff used these categories in organizing and presenting the findings to the Review Team on April 22, 2004. In each category the findings reflected progress and examples of successful practice as well as areas in which continued improvement was needed.

In reexamining the findings for purposes of preparing this report, the Annenberg staff found that the following five questions emerged as representative of the findings and as potential guiding questions for school improvement:

- How are our students doing?
- What are we doing to support consistently high quality instruction for each student in every school?
- What are we doing to engage families in the education of their children?
- What are we doing to build bridges between Newport Public Schools and the Newport community?
- In what ways does the organizational culture of the Central Office reflect a service orientation in support of students, teachers, principals, families and the community?

These or similar questions should be asked repeatedly by school and central office personnel, by school committee members, by community and city leaders – by anyone who is willing to participate in the continuous improvement of Newport's schools.

The reorganized set of findings that appears below was presented to members of the Review Team on September 28. These findings are drawn primarily from the multiple perspectives of those who participated in focus groups and interviews (a list of the types of participants is included in Appendix C).

Findings

A. How are our students doing?

1. Respondents referred to efforts by the central office and by individual schools to increase the collection and examination of data regarding student performance.
 - There is much more emphasis on measuring the progress of students now than in the past.
The frequent check points and updates on student performance help parents know how their children are doing overall.
2. The findings below were gleaned from four focus groups of high school students.
 - Students report that the high school provides a safe environment.
 - Some students describe the high school as impersonal and feel overlooked or unimportant. Some teachers go the extra mile to support, teach, and celebrate students. However, students would like more help from their classroom teachers overall. Students claim that many teachers and guidance counselors don't care about them.
 - High school students want more rigorous learning opportunities.

B. What are we doing to support high-quality instruction for each student in every school?

3. Respondents cited ways in which the central office is focusing on and facilitating the improvement of instruction, particularly with respect to opportunities for ongoing professional learning.
 - Much more professional development is being offered now than in the past.
 - Established structures and practices provide opportunities for educators to meet regularly to address instructional issues and to serve on committees focused on curriculum, literacy instruction, and development of personal literacy plans.
 - Teachers in grade-level groups and principals participating in learning walks (school visitations) have opportunities to meet and work with peers.
 - Literacy coaches work closely with each other in grades 4 through 6, across schools.
 - Lead teachers, in the elementary and middle schools, meet before and after school to collaborate, problem-solve, and set up model classrooms.
 - The Academic Lab is seen as a vital source of student support, and students noted the increasing involvement of teachers from several content areas.
 - Teachers are viewed as a critical asset in the education of students. The district has recruited new teachers who appear energetic and excited about teaching, and some experienced teachers are noted as "some of the best."
4. Respondents pointed also to areas in which continued improvement is needed.
 - Teacher quality varies in significant ways from classroom to classroom.
 - There is no central curriculum offered to English-language learners.
 - There is less cohesion between programs and professional development initiatives than is desired by school-based educators.

- The district is seen as three systems; elementary, middle, and high. Programs don't seem to be connected as a child moves through the grades.
- Teachers assume different levels of personal responsibility for student achievement based on the school level – elementary, middle, or high.
- Respondents refer to two Newports – Fifth Ward and urban – and to tracking or privileged pathways in the district.
- Some believe that resources are being focused on low achievers at the expense (or exit) of higher-achieving students.

C. What are we doing to engage families in the education of their children?

5. Respondents cited ways in which the district and individual schools are reaching out to families.
 - The Family Service Coordinators (FSCs) are recognized for building bridges between schools and families and for communicating with parents who would otherwise have little direct contact with the schools.
 - Parents who are actively involved with their children's schools report that they are well informed and have open lines of communication with school personnel.
 - Parents acknowledge and value the efforts made by school administrators and staff to speak the languages of students and families whose first language is not English.
6. However, some respondents (in parent focus groups) felt that relatively few parents are closely connected to schools and that there is a lack of consistency among teachers and schools in maintaining positive lines of communication.
 - Effective teacher-parent communication depends largely on the initiative and resourcefulness of the individuals involved.
 - The more formal opportunities for communication – parent-teacher conferences – are too brief and impersonal, sending the message that those interactions are unimportant.
 - Many parents, particularly Spanish-speaking parents, don't feel comfortable in the schools.

D. What are we doing to build bridges between Newport Public Schools and the Newport community?

7. Respondents cited efforts by central office personnel to reach out to others in the greater Newport community in search of additional resources in support of students and schools.
 - Relationships have been forged with health service providers to garner resources that complement district programs and services.
 - Past collaborations have increased the level of programmatic and fiscal resources accessible to schools (e.g., FSCs and Thompson renovations).

- A volunteer literacy program, BOLD, has brought needed volunteers into the schools.
8. Some respondents spoke of the need for clearer and more consistent communication and connections between the district and the broader community.
- The community at large does not know much about the school system's initiatives and efforts toward improvement. Several respondents cited the need for a public information officer and for ongoing development of the Newport Public Schools Web site.
 - There is a question about whether the city of Newport is committed to funding public education.
 - The role the central office should play in facilitating community collaboration is unclear.

E. In what ways does the organizational culture of the central office reflect a service orientation in support of students, teachers, principals, families, and the community?

9. Respondents expressed appreciation for the accessibility and responsiveness of central office personnel.
- “I do think that the ears of the central office are more open than before. They are there. They are at meetings.” “I think the lines of communication definitely have opened.”
 - central office personnel are friendly, helpful, and accessible to school personnel, and it seems that good working relationships exist among them (i.e., central office staff).
 - Principals and teachers feel if they ask for something, the central office staff will try to provide it.
10. Some respondents expressed a desire for opportunities to better understand the central office's approaches to the implementation of continuous school improvement.
- The central office seems to move from one thing to the next without clearly articulating the connections between them.
 - It is not clear how the central office evaluates the effectiveness of programs or how school-level data filters up to the central office. There may be an assumption that implementing programs will lead to increased student achievement, but there is little emphasis on examining the effectiveness of the programs themselves.

Recommendations from the Annenberg Institute Based on COR Team Findings

The members of Newport Public Schools' central office staff represent a promising diversity of skill sets and experience that should allow the district leadership team to focus on the various elements commonly identified with continuous improvement. The recommen-

dations presented here address implicitly those elements and are intended to encourage Newport Public Schools to build upon recognized successes and to consider alternative approaches to improved performance throughout the district.

1. Identify and replicate best practices.

Essentially all school districts face the challenge of providing consistent excellence in their approaches to instruction and to family and community engagement. Therefore, it is recommended that the central office of Newport Public Schools *identify and replicate “best practices.”*

- Identify promising *instructional approaches* that are leading to positive student learning outcomes. Analyze the common elements of these practices so they can be understood and replicated in multiple sites across the district.
- Acknowledge the pockets of success you have had *engaging parents* and families and identify strategies, practices, and approaches that have proven to be effective with hard-to-reach parents and families. Pinpoint and document key components of those initiatives and develop ways to share/spread that knowledge among administrators, staff, and teachers.
- Learn from and build on your successes in building *community partnerships* and in mobilizing *public support* for education in Newport. Identify the essential elements of successful projects and embed them in future efforts to sustain existing relationships and develop new ones. Increase the focus on learning from your community partners about promising strategies of public engagement.
- Develop a system for ongoing sharing of “best practices” across schools through multiple formats (e.g., newsletters, focus groups, classroom visitations, coaching).
- Extend the work of individual school teacher groups to work with central office staff in developing a menu of formative assessment tools that will help communicate incremental improvements in student performance as well as inform instructional practice throughout the district.

2. Provide high-quality professional learning opportunities.

Enhancement of student performance depends greatly on continued improvement in the quality of instruction provided. This requires school districts to invest in the ongoing professional learning of teachers and administrators. Therefore, it is recommended that the central office of Newport Public Schools *continue to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities for all educators.*

- Provide professional development experiences that are differentiated for educators who are at various stages in developing their practice.
- In providing professional development related to instructional programs and/or strategies, include guidelines for differentiating instruction and modifying programs to meet the learning needs of each student.

- Provide opportunities for educators to share their experiences and knowledge and offer them specific guidance on how best to create sustainable communities of practice. Specifically, provide them with opportunities to acquire the skills and practices needed in developing collaborative learning communities – methods for observing, analyzing, and communicating, openly and honestly, about school data and teacher and student work.

3. Communicate clearly about decisions related to resource allocation and district initiatives

School districts face the challenge of engaging their school communities in understanding the policies and actions taken to serve each student, especially where the diversity of the student population is increasing. Therefore, it is recommended that the central office of Newport Public Schools *communicate clearly about decisions related to resource allocations and district initiatives*.

- Increase the transparency of, and communication about, the connections among resource distribution, student learning needs, and current student performance levels. Be clear and consistent in your communications about why resource allocations vary from school to school based on the varying learning needs and assets of children. Make clear to all the meaning of educational equity.
- Define and communicate the connections among district initiatives and how those initiatives are aligned with the district’s mission and strategic plan. This practice will allow the central office to focus more explicitly on the instructional agenda, fostering those initiatives that support that agenda and eliminating those initiatives that distract from the agenda.

4. Clarify roles and responsibilities.

Many districts attempting to provide supplemental services to students and schools find that their best efforts are hampered by a lack of shared understanding of purposes or roles. Therefore, it is recommended that the central office of Newport Public Schools *clarify roles and responsibilities*.

- Provide teachers with clarification regarding the roles and responsibilities of educators and other professionals who provide much-needed support to students and adults in schools (e.g., social workers, reading teachers, instructional coaches).
- Provide clarification regarding the roles and responsibilities of central office personnel.

5. Reconsider the roles played by central office personnel in providing direct support to schools.

The service orientation of Newport’s central office has seemed to result in its personnel spending significant amounts of time and energy in responding to school-based problems. In view of increasing demands on district offices to engage in data collection and report-

ing, in addition to the ongoing demand for designing enhanced support for instruction and community involvement, it is recommended that the central office of Newport Public Schools *reconsider the roles played by central office personnel in providing direct support to schools.*

- Examine the history of school requests for support and identify areas where central office staff members can spend their time building the capacity of school-based educators to address problems on their own – relying on human resources within and across schools. This does not mean central office staff should spend less time in schools. Instead it encourages a more judicious use of central office staff time in schools so that expertise is better distributed systemwide.

Possibilities for Future Engagement – Next Steps

Conversations among central office personnel and Annenberg Institute staff have led to the following proposal for continued collaboration in building on the Central Office Review while connecting it with the district’s ongoing strategic planning.

After two months:

- Share findings with school personnel and everyone on the Review Team.
- Develop strategies for action.
- Begin initiating action steps.
- Meet with Annenberg Institute staff in December to take stock of what has happened.

After four months:

- Adjust strategies for action (if necessary) based upon two-month check in with Annenberg staff.
- Work with Annenberg staff to convene a follow-up visit to interview key district personnel and/or community actors to inquire about the impact of district actions thus far.
- Review preliminary results and constituent feedback obtained during the follow-up visit.
- Assess how deeply action steps are incorporated into the district’s strategic plan.
- Assess connection and/or alignment of strategies for action with the work of the school committee.

After six (6) months:

- Review preliminary results: What practices have been put in place as a result of strategic actions?
- Assess how deeply action steps are incorporated in the district’s strategic plan.
- Conduct a final check-in with Annenberg staff.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Appendix A

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and technical-assistance organization. An independent center at Brown University, the Institute's mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools serving disadvantaged children.

As one of the only organizations in the country studying and working on the problem of education reform "at scale," the Annenberg Institute has responded to requests from school districts across the nation to assist them in creating whole systems of successful schools. With support from Carnegie Corporation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Annenberg Foundation, among others, the Institute is currently working in cities as diverse as Chicago, New York, Sacramento, Chattanooga, and Minneapolis. The Institute's efforts supporting Rhode Island school districts and communities are provided *pro bono* as evidence of interest in supporting improvement locally as well as nationally.

Appendix B **Members of the Central Office Review Team**

Representing Newport schools and community

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Mary Canole
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Representing the Rhode Island Department of Education

David Abbott
Michael Barnes

Representing the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Frank Barnes
Ricardo Dobles
Ellen Foley
Judith Pelchat
Hal Smith
Margaret Votta
Dennie Palmer Wolf

Work of the Central Office Review Team

Appendix C

- October 17, 2003 Orientation: In this first meeting and work session, the team identified positive and promising learning opportunities that are being provided for Newport's children, engaged in a text-based discussion of *Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning*, and reviewed some contextual and demographic data regarding the composition of the Newport community.
- December 5, 2003 Team members were assigned to four groups of six or seven; each group visited a different pair of the district's eight schools. The team reconvened to review data regarding student achievement, school profiles and performance, district expenditures and demographics of Newport within the context of Rhode Island.
- December 11, 2003 The Review Team selected a focus for its exploration - **accelerated academic, linguistic and cultural supports for students** - and began developing a list of questions as well as a list of individuals or groups to whom the questions would be addressed.
- January 7, 2004 Several representatives of the Review Team met to draw up a list of persons to be interviewed and to identify the categories of participants needed for focus groups.
- January 13, 2004 Team members signed up to serve as facilitators or recorders for focus groups and developed sets of questions customized for the focus group participants (e.g., students, principals, leaders of community-based organizations).
- January 20 to
April 1, 2004 Team members gathered data from 25 interviews and focus groups. The sessions had been scheduled to occur during three weeks, from January 20 to February 5, but several of the focus groups had to be rescheduled due to conflicts with school events or inclement weather.
- Annenberg Institute and RIDE staff conducted interviews of central office personnel and school committee and city council members.
- Various members of the Review Team facilitated focus group sessions involving the following:
- Students (four groups – high school students including special needs students and English Language Learners)
- Parents (four groups – high school, middle school and two groups for parents of elementary school students)

Teachers (three groups – elementary schools, middle school, high school)

Principals (two groups – elementary, secondary)

Teacher Union Representatives

Family Service Coordinators

Newport Partnership for Families

April 22, 2004

The Review Team met to review the findings. (For those unable to attend, a second presentation of the findings took place on September 28.)

District Context: Newport Public Schools

Appendix D

The Newport school district employs 229 teachers to serve 2,915 students. Of those students, about half are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Fifty-nine percent are white, 23 percent are African-American, 13 percent are Hispanic, 3 percent are Native American, and 2 percent are Asian. Four percent of students received English as a Second Language or Bilingual Education services. Twenty-three percent of students received some kind of special education services, including the 5 percent that are in self-contained classrooms.

The public school participation rate for Newport is 79.7 percent, so approximately 20 percent of Newport's school-aged children do not attend public school in the district.

There are eight schools in the district; one is high-performing, four are moderately performing, and three are in need of improvement. Five schools are sustaining their efforts or making progress, while two schools have made insufficient progress according to state standards.

Student achievement trends are difficult to capture due to changes in state and federal reporting requirements. But gaps based on race/ethnicity as well as program type (e.g., special education, limited English proficient, Title I) remain at all levels. For example, in 2002–2003, while 50 percent of white high school students met or exceeded the reading standard, only 21 percent of Hispanic high school students met or exceeded the standard. At the elementary and middle school levels, more students achieved the reading standard overall in 2002–2003, and the gaps are smaller; but they are still apparent.

For more information, see <http://www.infoworks.ride.uri.edu/2004/default.asp>.

Primary source: Information Works! School Year 2002-2003



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