

THE VALUE OF RHODE ISLAND'S SALT SCHOOL VISIT

**A survey study of the perceptions
of SALT visit team members**

A Catalpa Ltd. Research Report

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by

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ABSTRACT

Between May 1997 and June 2004, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), with support from Catalpa Ltd., has conducted 235 SALT visits to Rhode Island public schools.

In establishing the SALT visits RIDE sought to improve the quality of information available to the school, the district, parents, citizens and RIDE for promoting school accountability and effective support systems that would assure important improvement in student learning.

The visits are led by practicing Rhode Island teachers, who are on leave from their school districts to take on two-year, temporary RIDE assignments as SALT Regent Fellows. At least 50% of the visit team members must be practicing classroom teachers, and each team must have at least one member who is a local school administrator. Team members spend a full, intense week conducting the visit.

The visit teams write a public report of their findings for each school that addresses these three questions:

How well do students in this school learn?

How well do teachers in this school teach?

How well does this school support learning and teaching?

As of June 2004, 1,468 Rhode Island teachers, principals, parents, School Committee members, Rhode Island Department of Education staff and other Rhode Island educators have served on SALT school visit teams. Of these, 994 were practicing Rhode Island teachers, released by their Districts for the week of the visit.

The *SALT Team Member Survey (May 2004)* was administered to this population of people who have served on SALT visit teams. The questionnaire was designed to gauge the perceived professional value that team members assign to their experience of participating on a SALT visit team. Questions also asked about their perceptions of the validity of SALT visit reports and of what the future of the visit in Rhode Island should be. Background information collected about respondents included their professional group membership, school level and whether their home school has been the subject of a SALT visit.

Some highlights of the conclusions from the results of this survey are:

Most respondents gave consistently high ratings to the value of the SALT visit as a professional development experience.

Most respondents gave high ratings to the validity of the reports their visit team wrote.

Most respondents believe that the value of the visit rests in its rigorous inquiry methodology.

Most respondents believe that the visit should have a continuous future in RIDE's accountability program.

Many respondents believe that "other" people do not see as a high a value to the visit as they do.

BACKGROUND

SALT SCHOOL VISITS

Between May 1997 and June 2004, 1,468 Rhode Island teachers, principals, parents, School Committee members, Rhode Island Department of Education staff and other Rhode Island educators served on SALT school visit teams. Of these, 994 were practicing Rhode Island teachers, released by their Districts for the week of the visit. Each person committed in writing to participate in the intense work of one of 235 SALT visit teams. During each school visit, a team member spends five days at the school, beginning before the students arrive and ending at 6:00 p.m. on four days of the visit and at 9:00 p.m. on one.¹ Each person spends approximately 58 hours on a visit week, which exceeds the requirement of all Rhode Island teacher contracts.²

The SALT teams follow a rigorous, demanding research protocol to gather evidence and prepare conclusions that answer these three questions about the school:

How well do the students in this school learn?

How well do the teachers in this school teach so that students learn?

How well does this school support learning and teaching?

All together the SALT visit teams have written more than 3,500 conclusions in published public reports about how well Rhode Island schools are performing at their central functions of learning and teaching. All team members on every team have unanimously agreed to the published conclusions of his or her team. The team must agree that each conclusion meets the specified criteria for conclusions, as specified in the SALT visit protocol.³

The visit is conducted as an inquiry. The team is required to follow a detailed protocol to ensure the rigor of the inquiry. The protocol is built from the tested principles of *Practice-based Inquiry*^{®4} that are based on observation about how peer visits actually do work to assure legitimate findings. (See Appendix for further detail.) The visit is focused on actual practice in a school in real time and provides team members with an unusual glimpse of the complex dynamics that shape a school's effectiveness as an institution of student learning. The visit requires the team to engage in extensive discussion and to build conclusions about the quality of a school's performance.

¹ In the first years of the visit, the visit schedule included four days and two late evenings.

² The good grace that Rhode Island teachers extend to the SALT school visit is caught by a comment by a team member after he returned to his school, "The work day seems soooooo very short now. Thank you for that."

³ *Handbook for Chairs of the SALT School Visit*. 2nd Edition. RIDE and Catalpa Ltd. February 2005.

⁴ *Practice-based Inquiry*[®] is a registered trademark of Catalpa Ltd. The principles of PBI[®] are included in the *Handbook*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

In spring 2004, RIDE asked Catalpa Ltd. to conduct a survey of how people who had participated on SALT teams perceived the value of serving on a SALT visit team.⁵

The research questions are:

- ◆ **What were team member perceptions about the overall quality of the experience of serving on a SALT visit team?**
- ◆ **Do they think that team reports are valid?**
- ◆ **What do team members think gives the SALT visit the value it has?**
- ◆ **How well did team members who are school practitioners regard the SALT visit as a professional development experience?**
- ◆ **How well did those, who are parents and professionals who are not in local schools, regard the SALT visit as a way to learn about schools?**
- ◆ **What do team members think about the SALT visit as a strategy for school improvement?**
- ◆ **What do they think should be the future of SALT?**
- ◆ **How differently do the main professional groups of participants (teachers, local school administrators, parents, other) see the visit?**

⁵ Since the early work on SALT, RIDE has conducted extensive feedback studies to improve the organization and procedures of SALT. See Appendix for list of studies.

METHODOLOGY

CONDUCT OF THE SURVEY

Catalpa Ltd. conducted the survey of 74 questions between May 11 and June 2, 2004, using an Internet site designed to administer surveys of this type.

The selection and wording of questions was based on an informal analysis of written evaluations from members of teams over the seven-year history of the SALT visit and on the discussions of several focus groups with team members to learn their views of what they gained from serving on a visit team.

Respondents were identified from more than 2,000 individuals who are listed in the “SALT Team Member” data-base as having expressed interest to the SALT management team of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) in serving on a visit team.⁶ Of that number, according to the database, 1,468 have actually served on a SALT team.

Initial invitations were sent via email, where email addresses were available, or by a postcard through the US mail. If email invitations were returned as undeliverable, the potential respondent was sent an invitation in the mail. Names of those whose mail invitations were returned were removed from the sample, if we were unable to locate a corrected address. Subsequent reminders were sent to those who had not replied to the survey. In all, four email reminders and one mail reminder were sent, followed by a final thank you notice.

The final population of the survey was 1,382, which excluded those for whom we had neither a correct e-mail nor a correct US Post Office address. The total number of valid responses was 595, generating a response rate of 43.1%.

The analysis in this report relies heavily on reporting frequencies for individual questions broken down by key demographic groups.

Respondents, who are not teachers, local administrators or parents are grouped in the analysis. The individual groups (e.g. RIDE staff, university staff) that make up the “other” category are too small to consider separately.

VALIDATION OF THE RESULTS

This study attempted to contact the entire population of SALT participants and is hence a *population* study, as opposed to a *sample* study. This is an important distinction. In a *sample* study, we can calculate the confidence bands around reported statistics. In a *population* study, however, we are unable to calculate such statistics because we cannot assume that those who responded were randomly selected.

⁶ This procedure means that the percentage of response is conservative, since the total population number is higher than it might be if we had used a definite positive indication of correct evidence as the criterion.

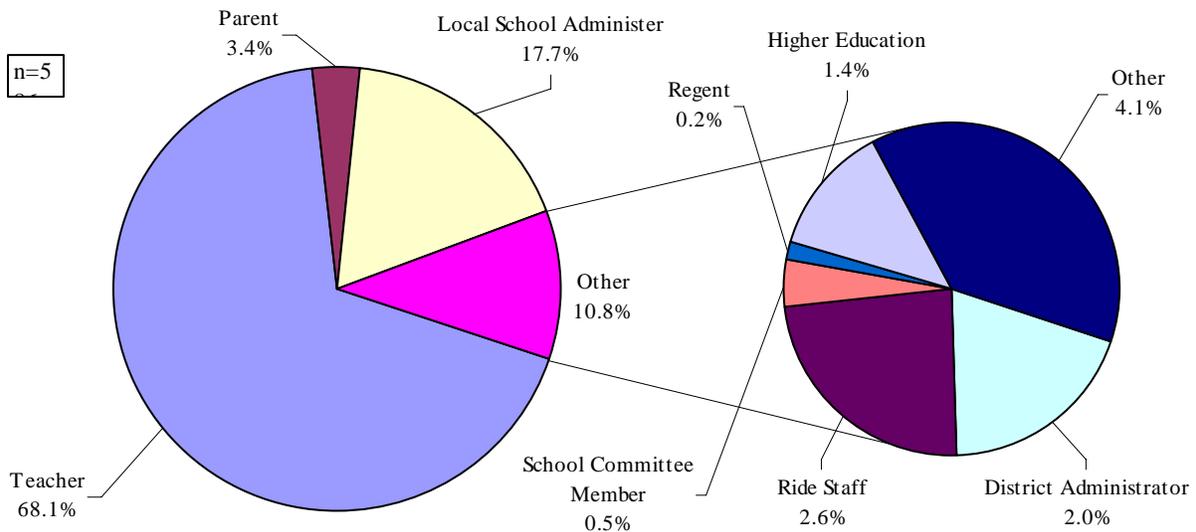
As a *population* study, this survey contains no sampling error but is potentially affected by a non-response bias. Non-response bias occurs when certain populations are underrepresented in the respondent population. Therefore, to validate the study, it is important to evaluate the representativeness of the respondent population.

We analyzed the representativeness of the respondent population using data available in the “SALT Visit Team Member” database. Data on professional background, school level and year of participation on a SALT visit team, as well as whether the participant’s home school had been visited, were compared to data for the target population as a whole. The findings reveal that the survey respondents well represent the target population.

Professional Background of Respondents

Respondents to the survey closely reflect the survey population as a whole. In all, 68.1% of the respondents are teachers, compared to 68.6% in the target population. More local school administrators responded than their representation in the population would suggest (17.7% of the sample, compared to 15.3% of the population). Parents, in contrast, are underrepresented accounting for only 3.4% of the respondents, as compared to 5.4% of the target population. This under representation is probably due to an inaccuracy in the addresses of parents in the database.

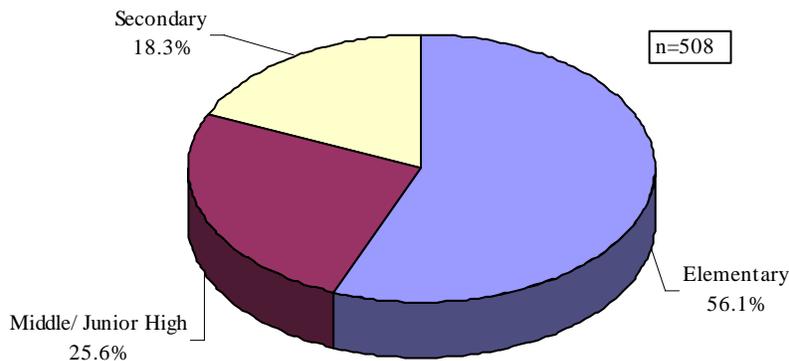
Figure 1: Professional Background of Respondents



Level of Home School of Respondent

Respondents represent the population by the level of the school where they work or which their children attend. The proportion of those who are tied to Elementary schools is slightly lower than those in the target population (56.1% compared to 57.3%). Secondary school respondents over represented their numbers in the population by an almost equal factor (18.3% vs. 17.3%).

Figure 2: Level of Home School of Respondent



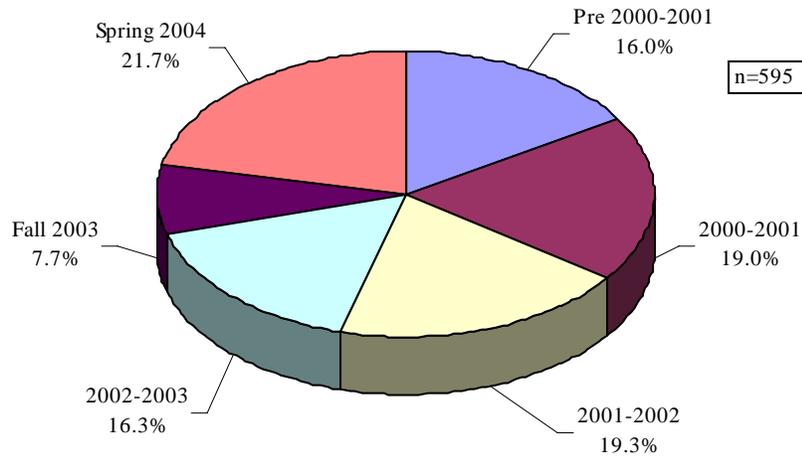
Year of Participation in SALT Visit

Respondents represent the total population at an unexpected high rate for how much time had passed since they participated on a SALT visit. For obvious

reasons, one would expect to see a decline in response as the amount of time increases since a person’s participation. The decline, in this case, is less than expected. Participants, who participated on a visit team during the last two years, are slightly over represented: 2003-2004 participants represented 29.4% of the respondents and 18.9% of the target population. 2002-2003 participants represented 16.3% of respondents as compared to 14.8% represented in the target population. This over representation is countered by an under representation of 2001-2002 participants (19.3% vs. 23.7%) and pre-2000-2001 participants (16.0% vs. 20.8%).

While there is a decline in participation over time, this decline is small and can easily be attributed to the currency of the database. This result is significant in itself, because it indicates that people who have participated in a SALT visit are still eager to describe their experience several years later.

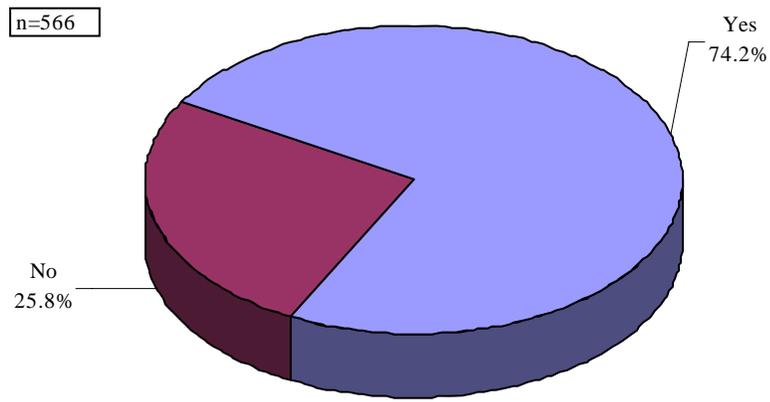
Figure 3: Year of Participation in SALT Visit



Whether Home School Has Had a Visit or Not

The participant pool is also well representative of the total population in terms of whether the participant’s home school has been visited. In all, 74.2% of the respondents are affiliated with a school that has been visited by a SALT team, as compared to 72.9% of the population.

Figure 4: Was Your Home School Visited?



RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The results of the survey are reported by these themes:

- ◆ The overall quality of the experience of serving on a SALT visit team
- ◆ The validity of SALT visit reports
- ◆ The SALT visit as professional development for school practitioners
- ◆ The SALT visit as a way to learn about schools for parents and professionals, who are not in local schools
- ◆ What gives the SALT visit its perceived value
- ◆ What is the perceived effectiveness of SALT activities for school improvement
- ◆ The future of the SALT visit

We begin each theme with a brief definition and introduction. We then report the results for each survey question within that theme. When the patterns of response to the question warrant it, we provide additional discussion of the results. Finally, we draw one or more conclusions about what we think the response indicates about the theme. We also sought to recognize additional specific limits that might pertain to each set of questions, stemming from the wording of the question or how it was asked.

In citing each survey question, we clearly indicate whether that question was asked of the total sample of respondents or of one of the professional groups (teachers, local school administrators, parents and others). We also indicate for each question either the scale or the items of the survey to which the participants were asked to respond. In some cases, we include relevant information from other data sources.

THE OVERALL QUALITY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SERVING ON A SALT VISIT TEAM

Introduction

The starting point was to gauge the respondents’ perceptions of the overall value of the visit by asking each person to rate the quality of the experience of serving on a SALT visit team and to indicate whether they would recommend the visit to their professional peers.

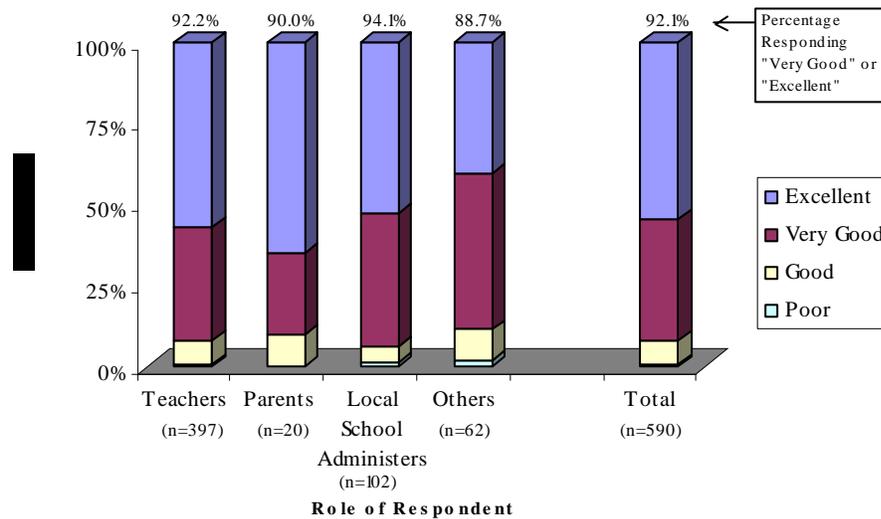
Results

Overall quality

Question: All: *How do you rate the quality of the experience(s) you had as a SALT team member?*

5-point scale: Excellent to Very Poor

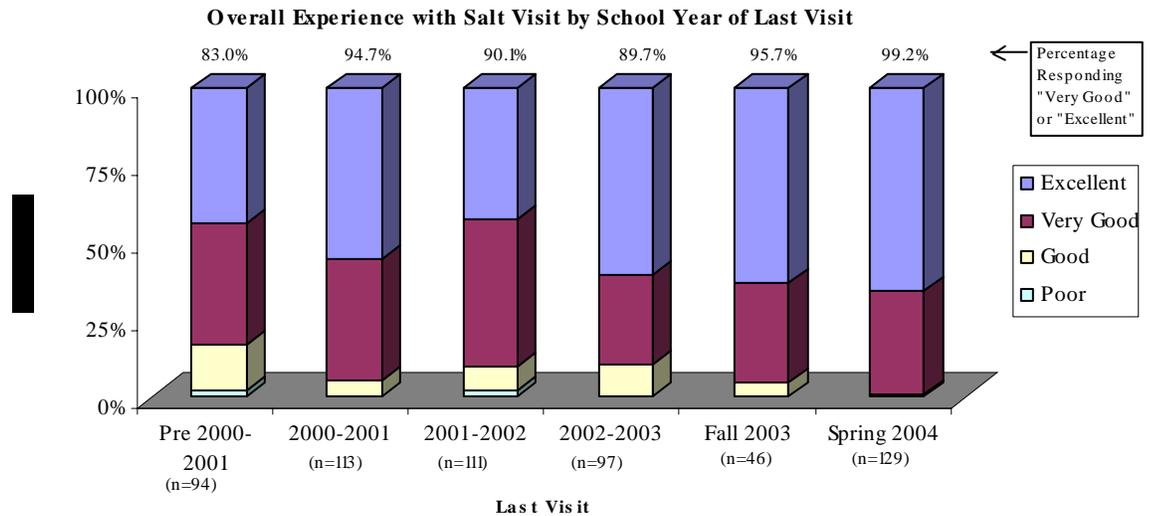
Figure 5: Rating of Overall Quality of Experience as Team Member



As Figure 1 shows, 92.2% of all respondents rated their experience as “excellent” or “very good.” Less than 1% (4 respondents) rated their experience as “poor” or “very poor.”

Local School Administrators rated their SALT team experience highest (94% as “excellent” or “very good”) followed by *Teachers* (92.2%). The lowest rating was for *Others* (88.7%).

Figure 6: Rating of Overall Experience by School Year of Last Visit



As Figure 2 shows, when responses are grouped by the year the team member served on a visit team, the percentage of those who rate the experience as “excellent or “very good” starts at 83% for teams that were formed before September 2000. It climbs to 94.7% in 2000-2001 and then declines to 89.7% in 2002-3. From that point the ratings increased to 99.2% for the spring of 2004.

Recommendations to peers

Respondents were asked to say how strongly they agreed that they would “certainly recommend” the visit to their peers. This question was asked for each professional group, with minor tailoring of the question to fit each group.

Question: Teachers: *How strong is your agreement with this statement: “I would certainly recommend to other teachers that they serve on a SALT team.”?*

5 point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

Question: Local School Administrators: *“...to other principals and local school administrators...”*

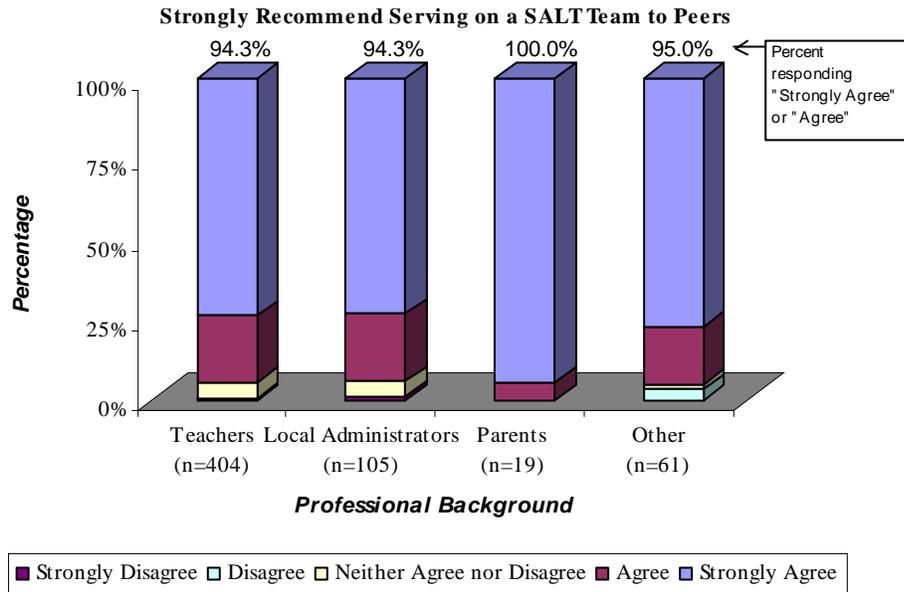
Question: Parents: *“...to other parents...”*

Question: Others: *“...other people with my professional interests...”*

5 point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

This difference in wording seems minor, so we have presented results that compare responses by group.

Figure 7: Would Certainly Recommend Serving on a SALT Team to Peers



The percentage of respondents who say they “strongly agree” or “agree” that they would “certainly recommend” serving on a SALT visit to their peers is high (94.6%). This response remains consistent across the professional groups. The greatest difference is between *Parents* and the other three groups. The percentage for *Parents* is higher (100%). Only 5 respondents (0.7%) indicated that they “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”

Conclusions

Participating as a member of a SALT visit team was rated as an experience of high quality by participants on SALT visit teams. 92.2 percent of the respondents rated the visit experience as either “excellent” or “very good.” Further, 94.6% agreed they would “certainly” recommend the visit experience to their peers.

While the analysis of differences across professional groups reveals some interesting points noted above, more noteworthy is the consistency across the groups in rating the quality of the experience highly.

This survey finding that team members perceive the visit to be an experience of high quality is consistent with the findings from less systemic formats—e.g., early focus groups of team members held to critique the visit experience and the feedback comments that team members have sent to SALT staff in response to a general invitation to do so.

VALIDITY OF TEAM REPORTS

Introduction

The team's written report is the only product of the visit. The team spends 30 hours or more actually writing the report. Since the SALT visit has important accountability objectives, the validity of the report is an important policy issue.

However, since the team is made deliberately conscious of the importance of "getting it right," the report is an important issue in the perceptions of team members, as well. Not only do their perceptions of how they see the report's validity in hindsight provide a check on the validity itself, but this also sheds understanding on whether the quality of the report is a measure of what they value in their work as team members.

Over the seven years of the visit, these public reports have gained considerable legitimacy, as reports that matter for the visited school. Report results are frequently published in local newspapers, and most schools are seriously concerned about how well the report will portray them. It is reasonable to assert that the quality of a team's report has always been a concern of the team members who write it and that this concern has grown over time.

The team must reach consensus agreement that its conclusions and report meet a number of explicit criteria. This is a primary element of the visit methodology to assure that a team's findings are valid. How well team members, no longer in the team setting, still perceive that their report did meet the criteria is an important check on the report's validity. The test for *Accuracy* is the single most important of these criteria for the report's validity.

We asked respondents to rate the report they helped write on several of the explicit criteria the team is required to use as it prepares its findings.

Results

The report their team wrote

Question: All: *How well does your team's report rate on each of the following:*

Accuracy of conclusions

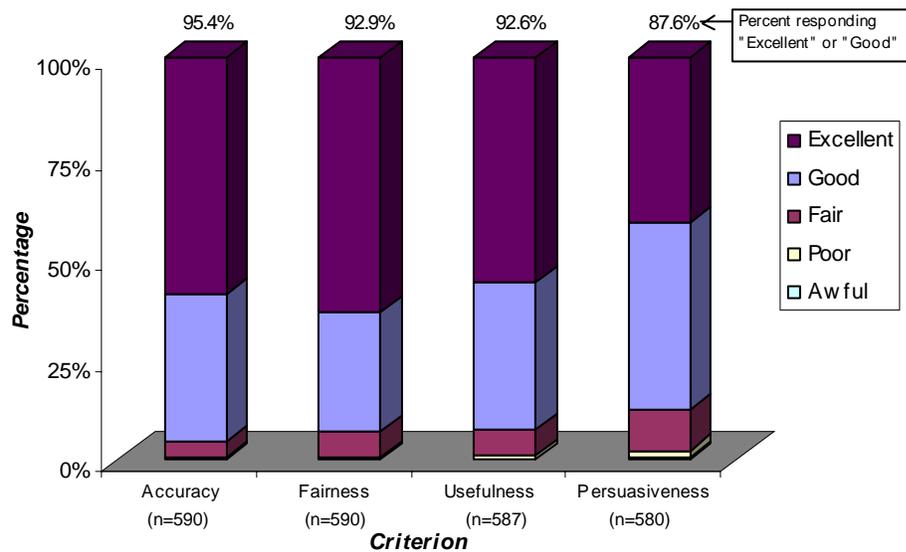
Fairness to the school

Potential usefulness for the school

Persuasiveness to the school to take productive action

Each item rated on a 5 point scale: Excellent to Awful—No Opinion

Figure 8: Rating of Team’s Report on SALT Visit Criteria



The percentage of respondents who judge that their report rates “excellent” or “good” on these criteria ranges from a high of 95.4% down to 87.6%. The total range between measures is 7.8%.

When the items are ordered by rank, *Accuracy*—the criterion that the team discusses the most in the team room—is ranked the highest (95.4% “good” or “excellent”). While *Fairness* received the next highest rating in the ranking (92.9%), it received the most “excellent” ratings (63.4%) of any of the items. *Usefulness* (92.6%) and *Persuasiveness* (87.6%) follow on the list.

Local School Administrators rated the validity of their team’s report more evenly than other professional groups across the criteria. In contrast to other professional groups, *Local School Administrators* rated their teams’ report higher for *Usefulness* than they rated it for *Fairness* (95.1% vs. 93.2%). Furthermore, they gave *Persuasiveness* the highest rating of any of the professional groups (91.2% vs. 86.6%).

Teachers rated reports higher than other groups for *Accuracy* (96.2% vs. 93.5%). *Other* respondents rated their visit report lower on all of the criteria. They rated their reports particularly low for *Persuasiveness* relative to other team members (77.6% vs. 88.5%).

Participants from a secondary school rated their reports higher for *Accuracy*, *Fairness*, and *Usefulness* compared to other participants. In contrast, they rated their reports lower for *Persuasiveness* (85.9% vs. 89.2%).

Participants from elementary schools rated their report higher for *Persuasiveness* (90.0% vs. 86.8%) and lower for *Fairness*, compared to those from other school levels (92.2% vs. 94.6%). Participants from Middle schools rated their reports lower for *Accuracy* (93.8% vs. 96.5%).

The report written about their school

A large number of respondents indicated that they had come from schools that have had a SALT visit (420 or 71%). Rules regarding team membership exclude anyone from the school from serving on the team that visits that school. Thus, each of these team members had experienced the visit, both as a team member and as a member of a host school. We asked this group of respondents an additional question to learn how they rated the report written about their school.

Question: Those from schools that have hosted a visit: *How well does your school's report rate each of the following?*

Accuracy of conclusions

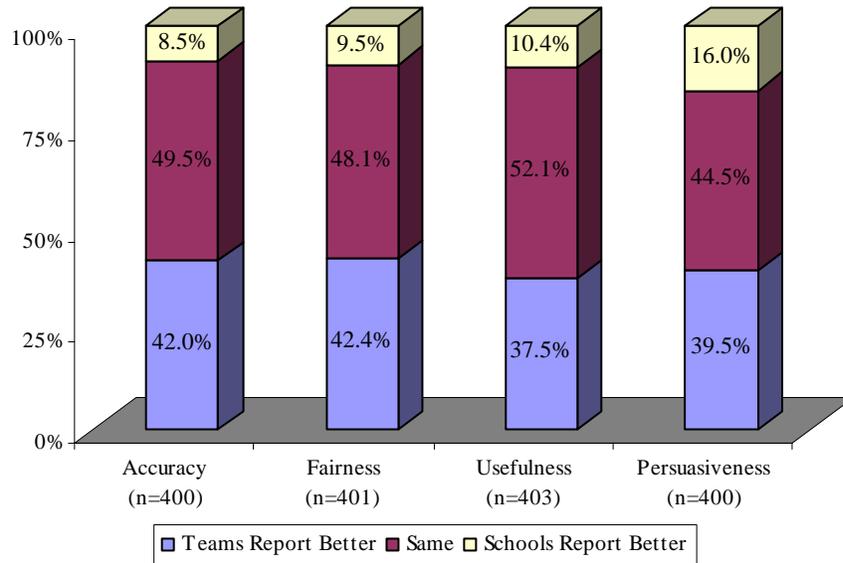
Fairness to the school

Potential usefulness for the school

Persuasiveness to the school to take productive action

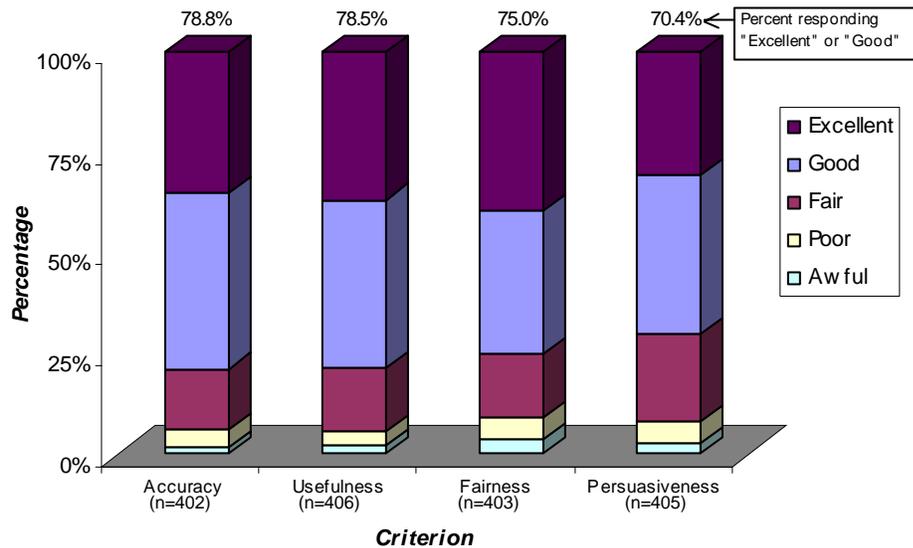
Each item rated on 5 point scale: Excellent to Awful—No Opinion

Figure 9: How Ranking of School Report Compares to Ranking of Team Report



On the whole, respondents rated the report they wrote higher than they rated the report received by their school. Slightly more than 40% of the respondents, who answered both corresponding questions, rated their school's report lower than their team's report, while on average, only 11% rated their school's report higher. 8.5% of respondents rated their school's report better for *Accuracy*, and 16% rated their school's report better for *Persuasiveness*.

Figure 10: Rating of Affiliated School Report by SALT Visit Criteria



The ranking of criteria for the affiliated school’s report places *Accuracy* (78.8%, “excellent” or “very good”) at the top of the list, followed by *Usefulness* (78.5%), *Fairness* (75.0%) and *Persuasiveness* (70.4%).

Interestingly, respondents rate their affiliated school’s report higher for *Usefulness* than *Fairness*—reversing how they ranked the report they wrote on these two criteria.

There are few discernable differences in results when broken down by professional background or level of affiliated school. One notable exception is that respondents affiliated with middle schools rate their school’s report considerably lower than other participants (70.2% vs. 78.1%).

Conclusions

Respondents rated their report’s standing on *Accuracy* at the highest level of the four criteria they scored. (95.4%) Respondents ratings of *Fairness* and *Usefulness* were also in the ninety percent level (92.9% and 92.6%, respectively) and ratings for *Persuasiveness* were somewhat lower (87.6%). Since what the school does with the report is the ultimate measure of *Persuasiveness*, it is interesting that *Persuasiveness* is the criteria most often rated higher by respondents from the school than by the team members who wrote the report.

Overall, forty percent of the respondents, who rated both a SALT team report that was written about their affiliated school by another SALT team and their team’s report, saw that the report their team wrote better met the criteria than the report for their school. Eleven per cent rated their school’s report higher than their team’s report.

Overall, these findings support the validity of SALT report findings.

THE SALT SCHOOL VISIT AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS (TEACHERS AND LOCAL SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS)

Introduction

While the SALT visit has stirred discussion about its value as inquiry or as a tool of accountability, few have questioned its value as professional development. Although the visit designers saw the value of the visit as professional development as being second to its value as inquiry, they thought it did provide a new and unusually effective professional development experience for teachers and local school administrators.

The pervasive view is that professional development for teachers is requisite for any plan to improve teaching. This pervasive view supports the work of many centers, education agencies and independent consultants. It is almost always a key piece of most theories of change and school intervention strategies. While it may have different specific references, the value of professional development is seldom questioned. Since the meaning of professional development shifts dramatically—particularly when comparing school-based professionals with out-of-school professionals—this section focuses on the perceptions of *Teachers* and *Local School Administrators* who served as visit team members. The next section will look at *Parents* and *Others*.

Results

Teachers

The survey questions for teachers were:

Question: Teachers: *Teachers often say that serving on a SALT visit team is the most powerful professional development experience that they have ever experienced. Was this true for you?*

Yes—No—Don't Know.

Question: Teachers: *How much difference did what you learned on the visit actually make to how well you teach?*

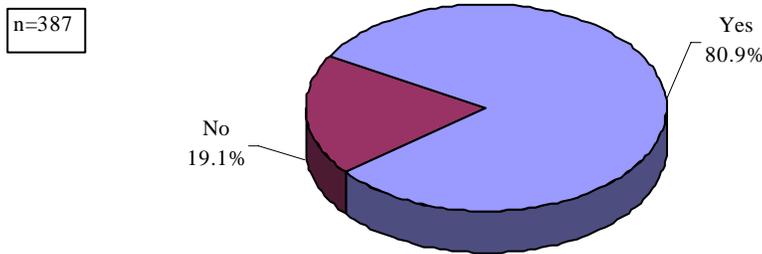
Great Difference—Considerable Difference—
Some Difference—No Difference

Question: Teachers: *Compared to other professional development that you have experienced, how would you rate the value of serving on a SALT team as a professional development experience for teachers?*

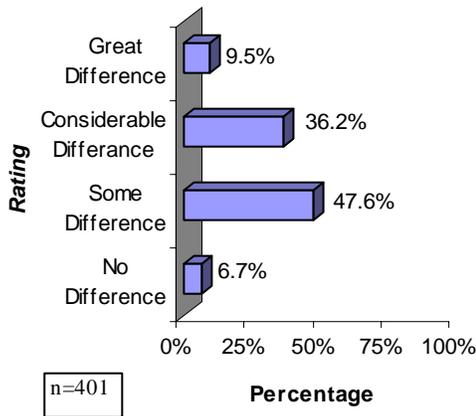
5 point scale: Very High to Very Low

Figure 9: How Teachers Rated the Visit as Professional Development

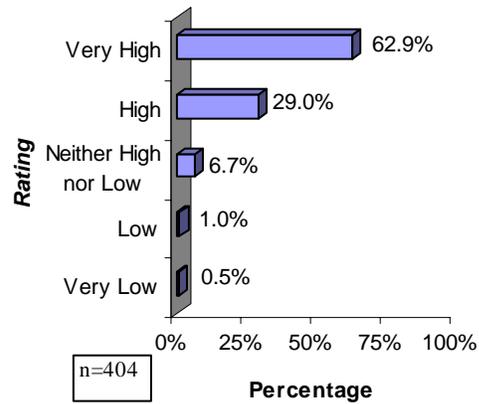
Teachers often say that serving on a SALT visit team is the most powerful professional development experience that they have ever experienced. Was this true for you?



How much difference did what you learned on the visit actually make on how well you teach?



How do you rate the value of serving on a SALT visit team as professional development experience for teachers?



Teachers do give the visit high ratings as a professional development experience. A full 80% of the teacher respondents see the visit as “the most powerful professional development experience” they have “ever experienced.” 91.9% rate the visit “very high” or “high” when compared to other professional development for teachers. Of these, 62.9% rate it “very high.” When asked if they thought the visit made a difference in how they taught, 93.3% indicated that it had at least made some difference, with most teachers choosing “some difference” or “considerable difference.”

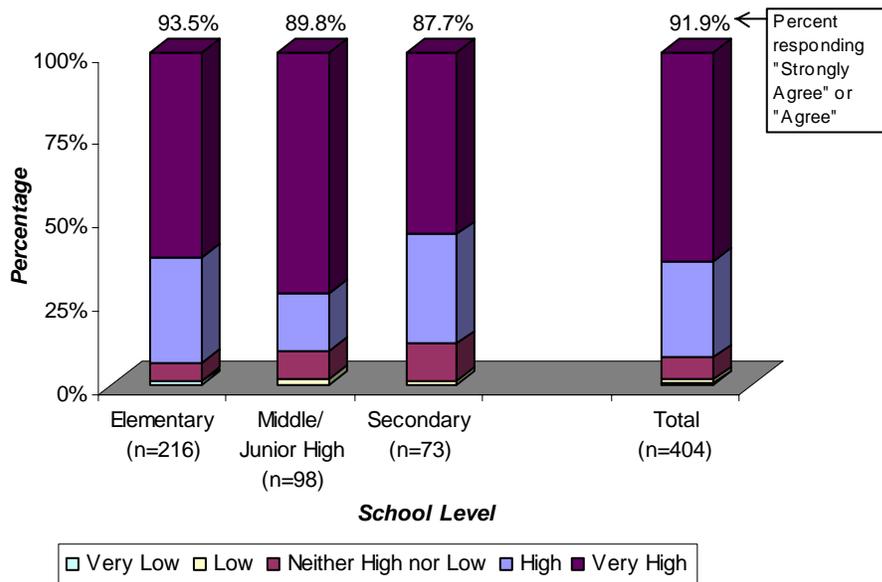
When responses are compared by school levels, elementary school teachers assigned it the highest of any of the teacher levels. Nearly half of elementary school teachers (47.2%) indicate that what they learned on a visit made a great or considerable difference in how they teach compared to 41.8% for secondary and middle/junior high school teachers.

Teachers from secondary schools consistently rated the value of the visit for professional development lower on these questions than teachers from the other school levels. Only 67.6% indicated that the SALT visit was their *most powerful professional development experience* compared to 83.6% for teachers for the other two levels combined.

Middle/junior high school teachers rate the professional development value of the visit somewhere in between secondary and elementary teachers, but closer to secondary school teachers. The exception to this trend is that middle/junior high school teachers were more likely than other teachers to say that the SALT visit was the *most powerful professional development experience* (85.1%). It is also worth noting that middle/junior high school teachers believe strongly in the value of the visit as professional development. While fewer middle/junior high school teachers rate the visit “very high” or “high” in comparison to elementary school teachers (89.8% vs. 93.5%), more of them rate the experience “very high” (72.4% vs. 61.6%).

The following figure shows these trends in the responses to the question of the value teachers found in the visit as professional development for teachers.

Figure 10: Ratings of Teachers by School Level of the Visit as Professional Development for Teachers



Local School Administrators

The “school leadership” movement of the last ten years has led to the belief that Local School Administrators, as well as teachers, require professional development. The pervasiveness of this belief is more recent and the referent skill-set is somewhat different, than for teachers. The survey asked Local School Administrators these questions:

Question: Local School Administrators: *Principals and other local school leaders often say that serving on a SALT visit team is the most powerful professional development experience that have ever experienced. Was this true for you?*

Yes— No—Don’t Know

Question: Local School Administrators: *How much difference did what you learned on the visit actually make to how well you teach?*

4 point scale

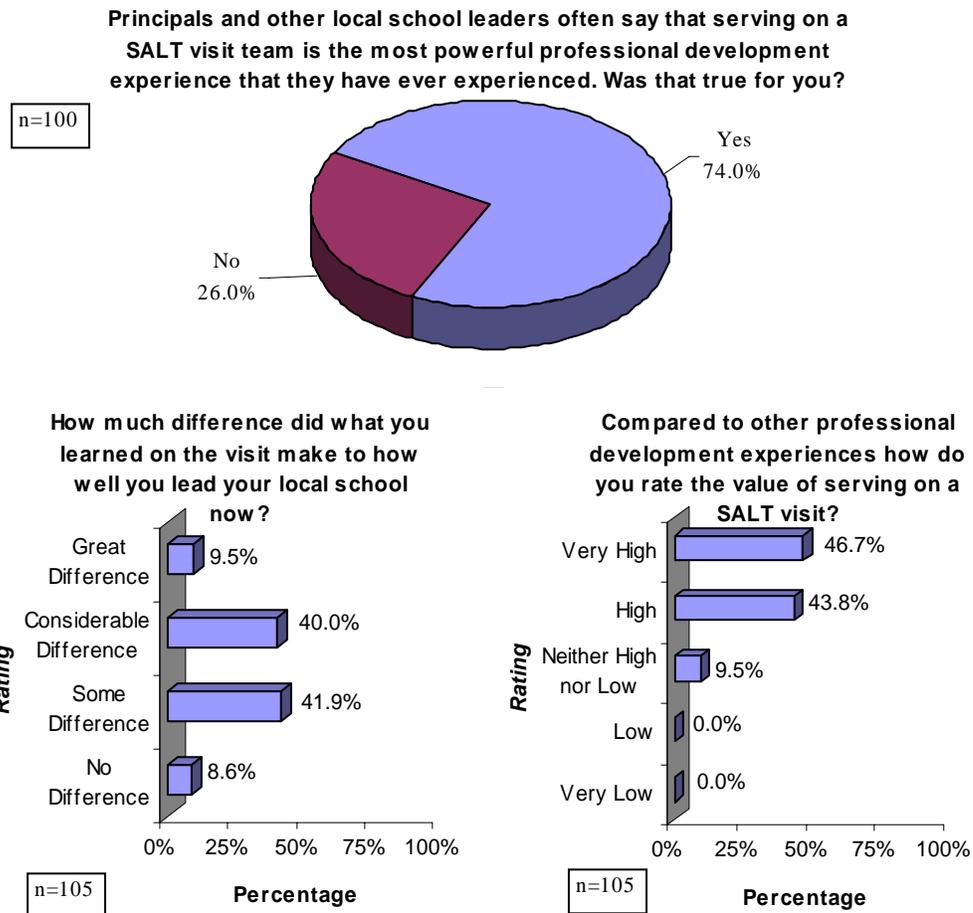
Great Difference—Considerable Difference—

Some Difference—No Difference

Question: Local School Administrators: *Compared to other professional development that you have experienced, how would you rate the value of serving on a SALT team as a professional development experience for a Local school leader?*

5 point scale: Very High to Very Low

Figure 11: How Local School Administrators Rated the Visit as Professional Development



The percentage of *Local School Administrators* who identified the visit as *the most powerful professional development experience that they have ever experienced* was somewhat lower than *Teachers* (74.0% vs. 80.9%). Nevertheless, *Local School Administrators* appear to believe that the visit has very high value as professional development for school leaders. They believe that their experience on the visit has had an impact on how well they do their jobs at a higher level than did the *Teachers* (49.5% “great difference” or “considerable difference” as compared to 45.6% for *Teachers*).

While a similar percentage of *Local School Administrators* rated the value of the experience as professional development for their professional group than did *Teachers* (90.5% vs. 91.8%), a substantially lower proportion of *Local School Administrators* rated the value as “very high” (46.7% compared to 62.9%).

Middle/junior high school *Local School Administrators* were more likely to say that they valued the visit as good professional development than did those from the other two school levels. They rated the visit as their *most powerful professional development experience* at a higher level (80.8% vs. 72.2%), as well as *what they learned that made a*

difference in how they lead their schools (60.7% vs. 47.3%). Interestingly, they rate the experience as a valuable professional development for Local School Administrators at a lower level than did Local School Administrators from the other schools (89.3% rated the experience “very high” or “high” compared to 94.7% for high school and 90.9% for elementary school administrators).

Conclusion

There is little doubt that *Teachers* and *Local School Administrators* think that the SALT visit is a powerful professional development experience. In fact, 80.9% of the *Teachers* and 74.0% of the *Local School Administrators* pronounce it as the most powerful professional development experience they have ever had.

THE SALT VISIT AS A WAY TO LEARN ABOUT SCHOOLS FOR PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS NOT IN LOCAL SCHOOLS

Introduction

Parents and *Others* do not have the extensive and costly professional development system that is available for *Teachers* and *Local School Administrators*. Nevertheless, the visit is not the only way most of these participants have related to a public school. On this basis, we asked them how they rated the visit.

Results

Parents

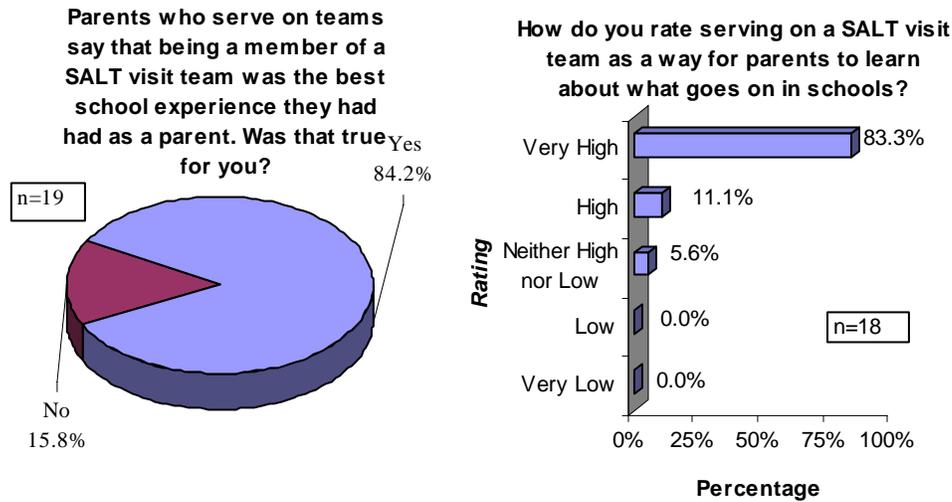
Question: *Parents: Parents who serve on teams say that being a member of a SALT visit team was the best school experience they had had as a parent. Was that true for you?*

Yes—No—Don't Know

Question: *Compared to other ways you have been involved in schools, how high do you rate serving on a SALT visit team as a way to learn what goes on in schools?*

5 point scale. Very High—Very Low

Figure 12: How Parents Rated the Visit as a Way Parents can Relate to a School



84.2 percent of the *Parents* saw the visit as the best school experience they had had as a parent. *Parents* also rated the value of the visit as a way to learn about the school at a high level. (94.4% rated the experience “very high” or “high” in comparison to other ways parents learn about the schools; 83.3% rating the experience “very high.”)

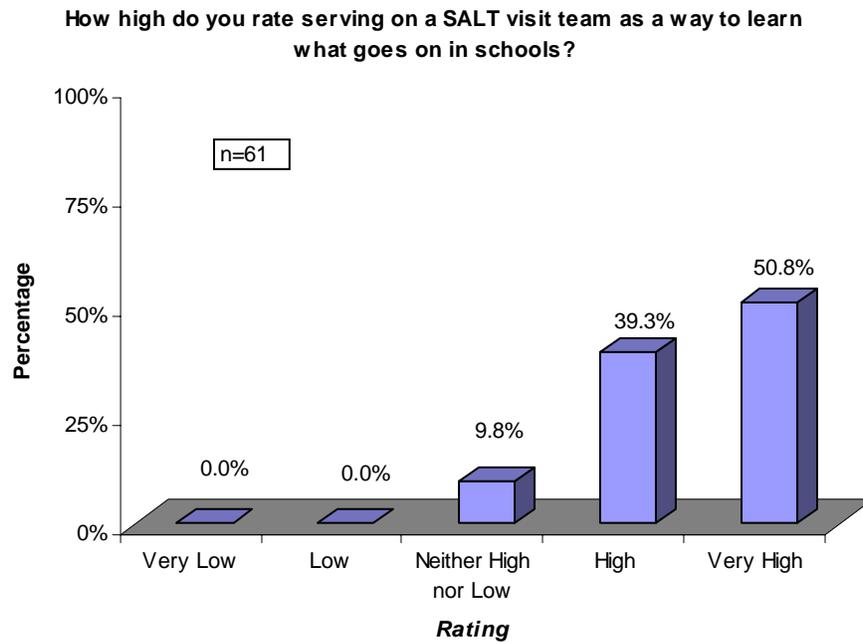
Others

Others were asked one question that relates to this issue:

Question: *Others: Compared to other ways you have been involved in schools, how high do you rate serving on a SALT visit team as a way to learn what goes on in schools?*

5 point scale: Very High - Very Low

Figure 13: Ratings by Others about the SALT Visit as a Way to Learn about Schools



90.2 percent of *Others* rated the visit *As a way to learn what goes on in schools* at “very high” or “high.”

Conclusions

While *Parents* and *Others* did not rate the visit as professional development, both groups did rate the visit as *a way to learn what goes on in schools*. Most members of both groups rated the visit on this dimension as “very high” or “high” (94.4% and 90.2%). *Parents* and *Others* also see an important value in the visit as inquiry.

WHAT GIVES THE SALT VISIT ITS VALUE

Introduction

To gauge what they thought made the SALT visit a valuable experience, we asked respondents to answer several questions:

- General impressions on what they gained
- Value of different components of the visit design
- Importance of the skills they were required to use
- Differences in perceptions among the professional groups

Results

General Impressions

Question: All: *How well does each of these phrases reflect what you think about your experience on a visit:*

Gave me an important perspective about what actually goes on in schools

Was a waste of time

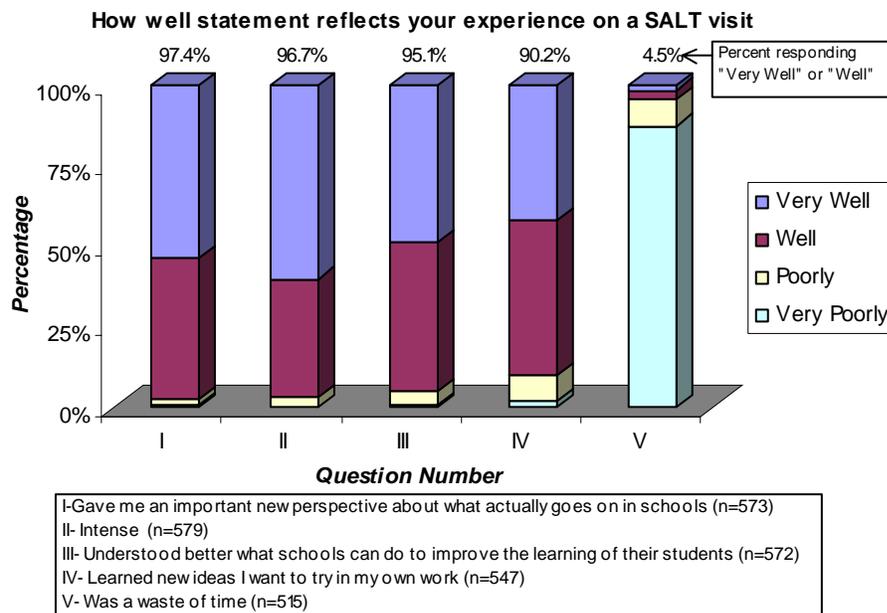
Intense

Understood better what schools can do to improve learning of their students

Learned new ideas I want to try in my own work

Six point scale: Very Well—Very poorly—No Opinion

Figure 14: How Well Does Each Statement Reflect What You Think About Your Experience



With one exception, the percentage of respondents choosing “very well” or “well” ranged from 90.2% to 97.4%. For the exceptional item, *Was a waste of time*, 87.4% of the respondents selected the lowest rating—“very poorly.”

The largest number of respondents chose “well” or “very well” (97.4%) when asked how well *Gave me an important perspective about what actually goes on in schools* reflects their experience with the visit. There are only small differences between professional groups on this item. While *Local School Administrators* rated this lowest (95.8% vs. 97.7%), the difference was small. A greater difference, however, exists when it is examined by those who responded “very well” (49.5% vs. 54.5%).

The next largest number of respondents chose “well” or “very well” (96.7%) when asked how well *Intense* reflects their experience with the visit. Differences across the professional groups were also small. Respondents in the *Other* and *Teacher* groups rated this higher than average (98.4% and 97.2%, respectively).

The next largest number of respondents chose “well” or “very well” (95.1%) when asked how well *Understood better what schools can do to improve learning of their students* reflects their experience with the visit. *Parents* and *Local School Administrators* rated this phrase the highest (100.0% and 97.9%, respectively). *Local School Administrators*, however, were the least likely to rate that this phrase reflects “very well” their experience (40.6% vs. 48.9%).

Learned new ideas I want to try in my own work elicited a substantially lower rating (90.2%). In the aggregate (“well” + “very well”), there are no notable differences between professional groups. *Teachers*, however, are much more likely to indicate that this phrase reflects “very well” their experience (45.8% vs. 32.1%).

Components of the visit

To understand the contribution of different components of the visit to a team member’s perceptions about the value of the visit we asked respondents to rate 10 components of the visit on importance “for doing a good job.”

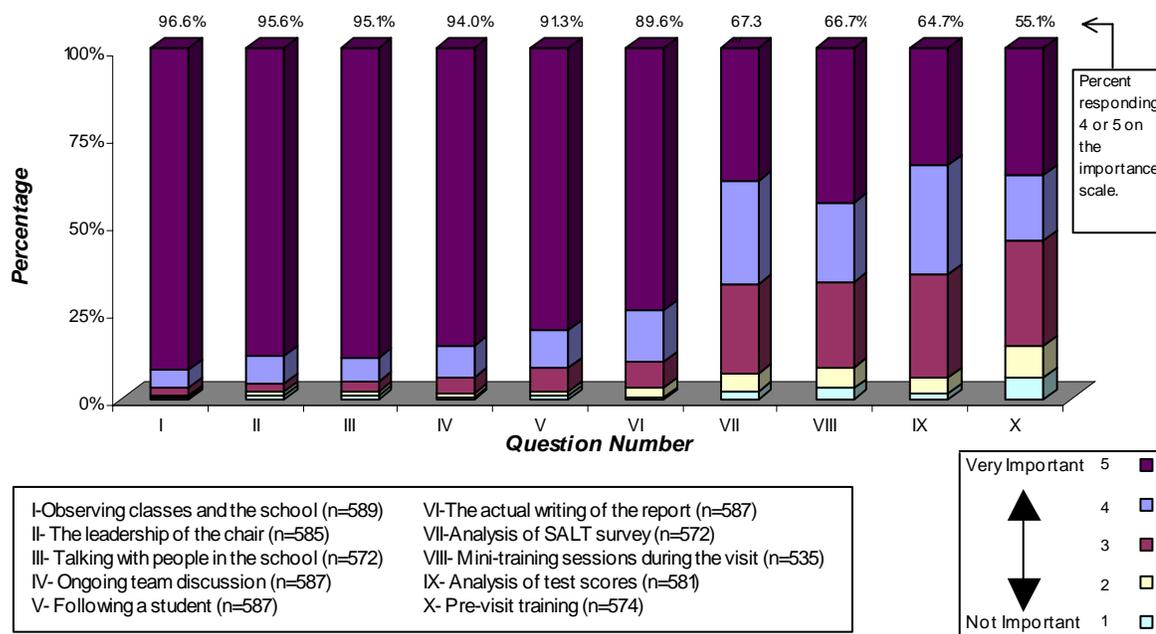
Question: All: *How important did you find each of these components for doing a good job as a team member?*

5 point scale: Very Important—Not Important—Don’t Know

- ◆ *Pre-visit training*
- ◆ *Mini-training sessions*
- ◆ *Following students*
- ◆ *Observing classes and the school*
- ◆ *Talking with people in the school*
- ◆ *Ongoing team discussion*
- ◆ *The actual writing of the report*
- ◆ *The leadership of the chair*
- ◆ *Analysis of test scores*

◆ Analysis of SALT survey

Figure 15: The Importance of Different Visit Components



Note: For this analysis we will use the term *net-importance* to signify the percentage of respondents who rated the component with a 5 or 4 on the importance scale.

Observing classes and the school received the highest rating of the list, (96.6% net-importance) with most choosing the highest rating (91.5%). *The leadership of the chair* was second (95.6%), followed by *Talking with people in the school* (95.1%). The next three—*Ongoing team discussion*, *Following a student*, and *The actual writing of the report*—were also high (94.0%, 91.3%, and 89.6%, respectively).

The ratings for *Analysis of the SALT survey* and *Mini-training sessions during the visit* were markedly lower (67.3% and 66.7%, respectively). While the difference between these components in terms of net-importance is small, respondents were more likely to give *Mini-training sessions* the highest rating (43.9% vs. 35.9%). *Analysis of test scores* and *Pre-visit training* received the lowest rating (64.7% and 55.1%, respectively).

Teachers rated the net-importance of *Talking with people in the school* higher than other groups (96.2% vs. 92.5%), as high as they rated *Observing classes and the school*. In contrast, *Teachers* rated *the Pre-visit training* lower than other groups (51.7% vs. 62.3%).

Local School Administrators rated *Following a student* higher than the other groups (95.1% vs. 90.4%) rating it third in importance above the *Mini-training sessions* and tying it with *Talking with people in the school*. *Local School Administrators* rate *The actual writing of the report* relatively low in importance in relation to other groups (87.4% vs. 91.7%).

Other participants provided the lowest net-importance rating for all components with the exception of *The actual writing of the report* and the *Analysis of the SALT survey*. This group rated the *Analysis of the SALT survey* highest relative to other groups (70.7% vs. 66.8%). The *Others* also rated *Ongoing team discussion* relatively high in relationship to other components, rating it second in importance above *Talking with the people in the school* and *The leadership of the chair*.

Parents provided lower ratings for the *Analysis of the SALT survey* and the *Analysis of test scores* relative to other groups.

Discussion

Respondents gave the highest rankings to visit components that involve the team member in active inquiry: *Observing classes and the school*, *Talking with people in the school*, *Ongoing team discussion*. These are unique features of the visit, compared to the usual range of experiences provided for school people.

Claims are often made that schools are becoming more “data driven.” For Rhode Island schools data usually refers to the data generated by *Analysis of test scores* and/or *Analysis of SALT survey* results. Both of these inquiry activities were rated lower than the more active components of the visit that focus on actual practice.

What Skills were perceived as important for conducting the visit

The SALT visit is unique in the experience of most team members in terms of the skills it requires from them to complete the task of gathering evidence, making judgments and writing the report.

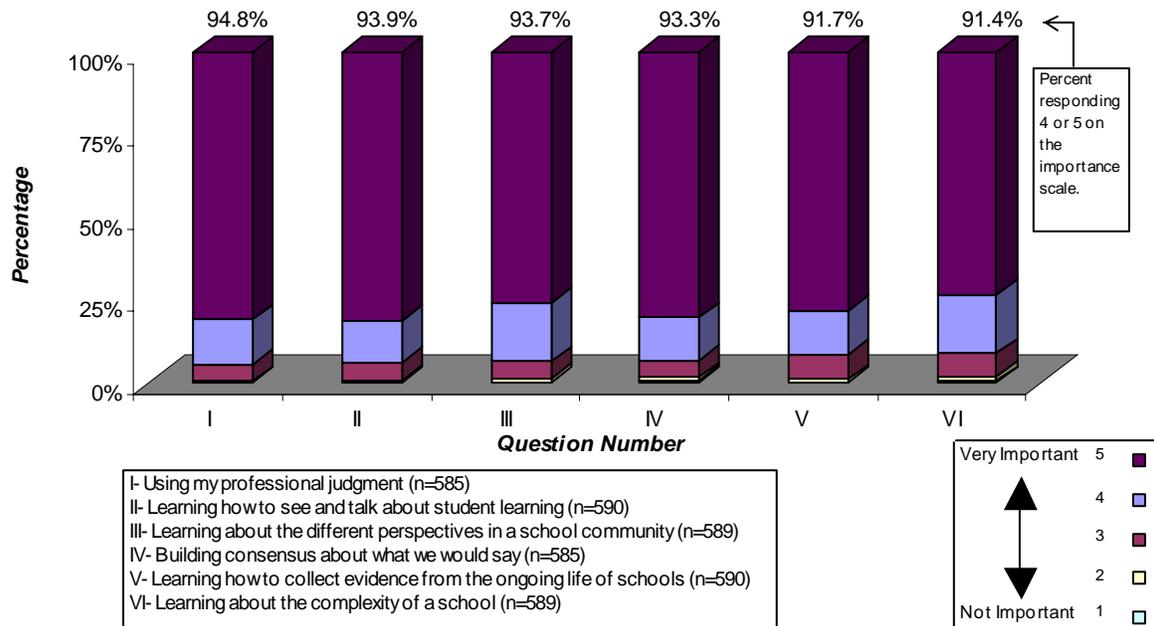
We asked respondents to rate the importance of the skills they were asked to use to see if that would partly explain their perceptions regarding the value of the visit.

Question: All: *How important were these skills in doing a good job as a member of the team?*

- Learning how to collect evidence from the ongoing life of schools
- Learning how to see and talk about student learning
- Using my professional judgment
- Learning about the different perspectives in a school community
- Learning about the complexity of a school
- Building consensus about what we would say

5 point anchored scale: Not Important to Very Important —Don't Know

Figure 16: Importance of Different Skills for a Team Member



The most striking finding is the high ranking received by all the listed skills. *Using my professional judgment* received the highest net-importance rating (94.8%). *Learning how to see and talk about student learning* was second (93.9%), followed by *Learning about the different perspectives in a school community* (93.7%), *Building consensus about what we would say* (93.3%), and *Learning from how evidence from the ongoing life of schools* (91.7%). *Learning about the complexity of a school* was the lowest (91.4%).

The results are similar across the professional groups of respondents with a few exceptions. *Local School Administrators* rate the importance of all skills lower than participants from other professional backgrounds. Most notably, *Local School Administrators* provide lower ratings for *Learning how to collect evidence from the ongoing life of schools* (88.5% vs. 92.3%). In contrast, *Other* participants gave relatively high net-importance ratings across a number of skills, most notably *Learning how to see and talk about student learning* was second (100% vs. 93.1%). As would be expected,

those who do not work within the local schools (*Parents and Others*) placed a greater importance on *Learning about the different perspectives in a school community* (96.4% vs. 93.2%).

Discussion

While there are some variations in these scores, the most important point is that all team members saw all the skills listed as important to their work. These are the skills that are believed by Catalpa Ltd. to be at the heart of the rigor of the visit as an inquiry process. They are carefully built into the visit design and protocol.

All of these skills involve active observation of, and analysis about, how a school works, along with a great deal of discussion with peers on the team to decide what the team should say.

What the visit gave to each professional group

Since the Questions for this theme were somewhat different for each of the four professional groups, they are reported by each group.

Teachers

Question: Teachers: *How much do you agree with each of these statements about the visit?*

Gave me a new understanding of the importance of what teachers do in their classroom

Gave me new ways to look at student learning in my classroom

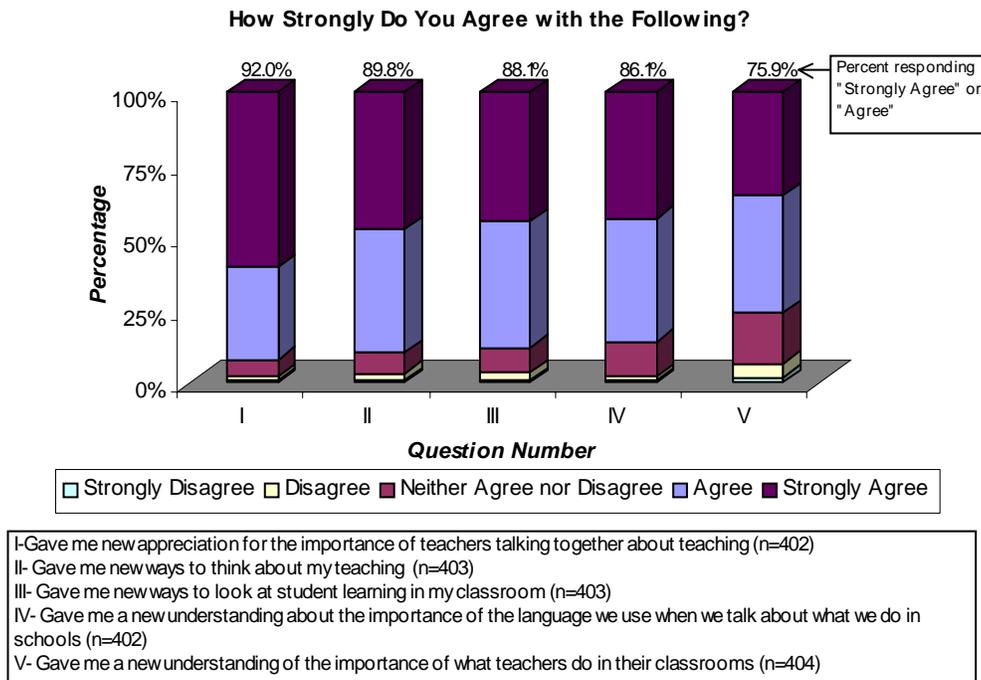
Gave me new ways to think about my teaching

Gave me new appreciation for the importance of teachers talking together about teaching

Gave me a new understanding about the importance of the language we use when we talk about what we do in schools

5 point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree—No opinion

Figure 17: Teachers’ Ratings of What They Gained from the Visit



It is interesting that the item that is least consistent and was given the lowest rating was *Gave me a new understanding of the importance of what teachers do in their classrooms*. A possible explanation for why *Teachers* responded this way was they thought, “I know that, even if the rest of the world doesn’t. It is not a new understanding for me.” Unfortunately, we did not ask about this item of respondents in the other groups.

The item *Teachers* rated highest was *Gave me a new appreciation for the importance of teachers talking together about teaching* (92.0% “strongly agree” or “agree” with 60.2% choosing “strongly agree”). *Gave me new ways to think about teaching* was rated lower (89.8%) followed closely by *Gave me new ways to look at student learning in my classroom* (88.1%). *Gave me a new understanding about the importance of language we use when we talk about what we do in schools* was next (86.1%).

Elementary school teachers gave slightly higher ratings to all of the items, compared to teachers at other school levels. The most notable differences were on these items:

Gave me new appreciation for the importance of teachers talking together about teaching (93.5% vs. 89.9%)

Gave me a new understanding about the importance of the language we use when we talk about what we do in schools (88.4% vs. 82.4%)

Middle/junior high school teachers rated *Gave me a new appreciation of the importance of teachers talking* item lower than other teachers (88.7% vs. 93.1%).

Secondary school teachers agree less strongly with *Gave me a new understanding of the importance of language* item than did others (80.6% vs. 86.9%). They also showed lower

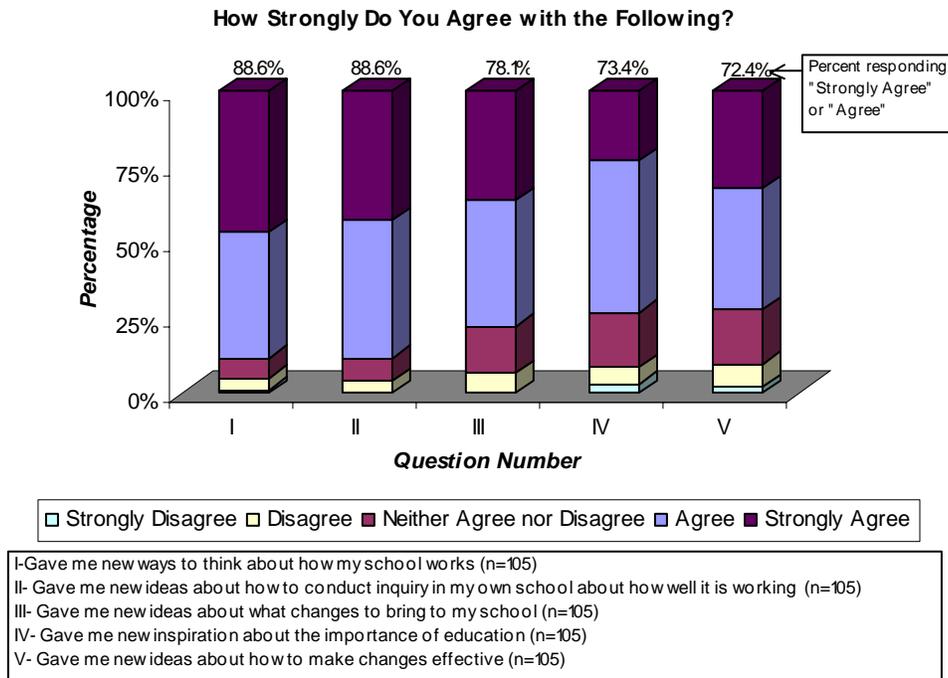
agreement on *Gave me new ways to look at student learning in the classroom*” (83.3% vs. 88.9%).

Local School Administrators

Question: Local School Administrators: *How much do you agree with each of these statements about the visit?*

- Gave me a new inspiration about the importance of education
 - Gave me new ways to think about how my school works
 - Gave me new ideas about how to conduct inquiry in my own school about how well it is working
 - Gave me new ideas about what changes should be brought to schools
 - Gave me new ideas about how to make changes effective
- 5 point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree—No opinion

Figure 18: Local School Administrators’ Ratings of What They Gained from the Visit



Local School Administrators rated *Gave me new ways to think about how my school works* and *Gave me new ideas about how to conduct inquiry in my own school* almost equally and at the top of their list (88.6% “strongly agree” or “agree”). They agreed less that the visit *Gave me new ideas about what changes to bring to my school* (78.1%). *Gave me new ideas about how to make changes effective* was rated lowest (72.4%).

While *Gave me new inspiration about the importance of education* was not rated lowest in terms of the net rating (73.4%), it received much fewer “strongly agreed” responses (22.9%). This is similar to the results for *Teachers*, where the respondents are likely to believe strongly in the importance of education prior to their participation in a SALT visit.

The differences between administrators from different levels of schools were small with one interesting exception. Local administrators from middle/junior high schools agreed more strongly than administrators from other school levels to *Gave me new ideas about how to make changes effective* (82.1% vs. 70.3%). They also gave somewhat higher ratings than those from other school levels to *Gave me new ideas about how to conduct inquiry in my school* (92.9% vs. 87.8%).

Parents

Question: Parents: *How much do you agree with each of these statements about the visit?*

Gave me a new inspiration about the importance of education

Gave me new ways to think about how my child’s school works

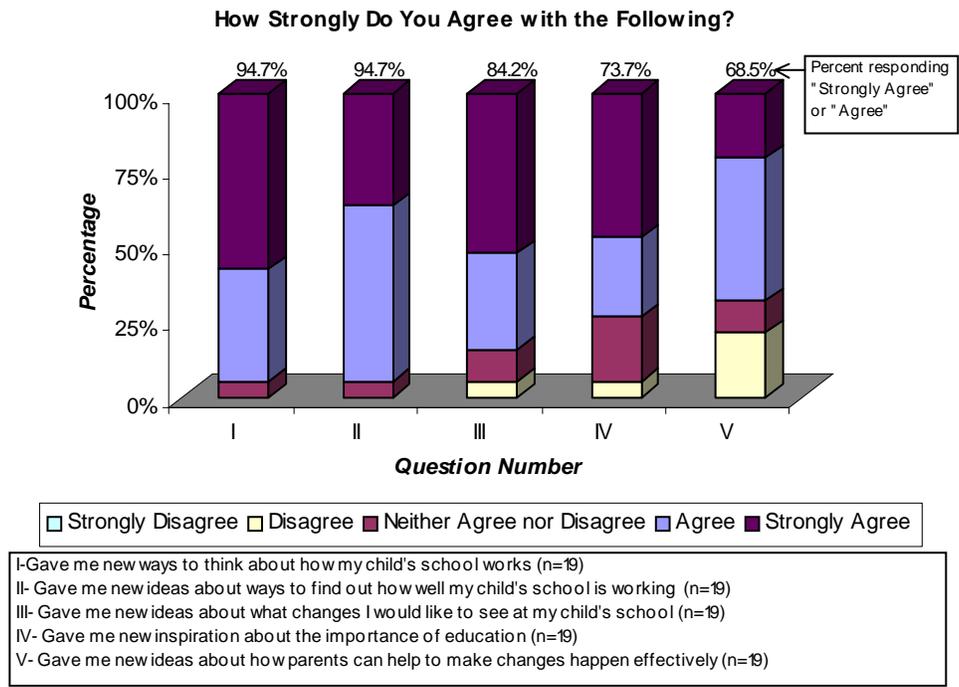
Gave me new ideas about ways to find out how well my child’s school is working

Gave me new ideas about what changes I would like to see at my child’s school

Gave me new ideas about how parents can help to make changes happen effectively

5 point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree—No opinion

Figure 19: Parents’ Ratings of What They Gained from the Visit



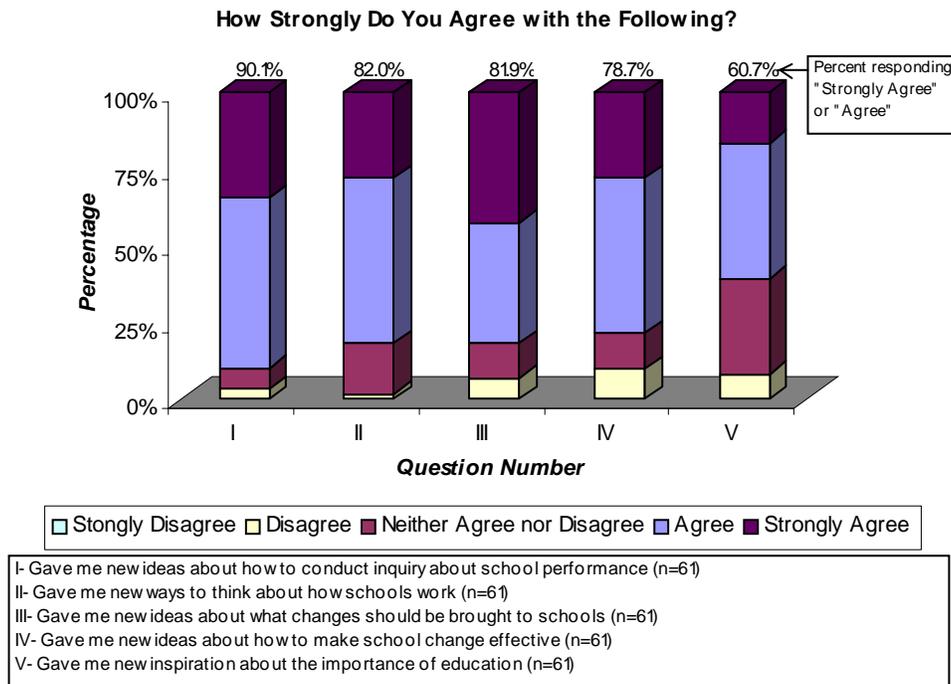
Parents' responses to each choice we gave them about what they gained from the visit follow. *Gave me new ways to think about how my child's school works* and *Gave me new ideas about ways to find out how well my child's school is working* were rated equally and at the top of their list (94.7% “strongly agree” or agree”). Parents rated *Gave me new ideas about what changes I would like to see at my child's school* lower (84.2%), followed by *Gave me a new inspiration about the importance of education* (73.7%). Parents rated *Gave me new ideas about how parents can help to make changes happen effectively* lowest (68.5%) with more than 1 in 5 saying they “disagreed” (21.1%).

Others

Question: Others: *How much do you agree with each of these statements about the visit?*

- Gave me a new inspiration about the importance of education
 - Gave me new ways to think about how schools work
 - Gave me new ideas about how to conduct inquiry about school performance
 - Gave me new ideas about what changes should be brought to schools
 - Gave me new ideas about how to make school changes effective
- 5 point scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree—No opinion

Figure 20: Others’ Ratings of What They Gained from the Visit



Others rated *Gave me new ideas about how to conduct inquiry about school performance* highest (90.1% “strongly agree” or “agree”) followed by *Gave me new ways to think about how local schools work* (82.0%). In net terms *Gave me new ideas about what changes should be brought to schools* was the next lowest rated (81.9%). This item, however, received the most “strongly agree” ratings (42.6%)—8.2% points higher than the next highest rated. *Gave me new ideas about how to make school changes effective* was rated next (78.7%), and *Gave me a new inspiration about the importance of education”* were at the bottom of their list (60.7%).

Conclusions

In spite of the somewhat scattered results, the overall picture is that a large majority of respondents from each group indicated they did gain important lessons from the visit.

The most important gift of the visit for each of the professional groups was its way of inquiring about how a school works. This method of the visit is linked closely to gaining new understanding about how a school works, which was also ranked at the top of the list.

Respondents in all groups rated lower the items that are usually more directly associated with school improvement strategies than they did those associated with school inquiry.

EFFECTIVENESS OF SALT ACTIVITIES FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

The underlying purpose for the design and implementation of the school visit was to find a way to generate better information for accountability and support strategies.

While it is possible to cast the visit into different roles within a larger accountability system, the issue for RIDE is—How does its comprehensive system for school support and accountability make best use of what the visit offers?

This section is geared to increasing understanding about what the visit team members think are the most effective parts of the SALT system as it now exists, with an eye toward strengthening it further.

Results

Question: All: When compared to all the school improvement initiatives you have been part of how effective do you rate each of these SALT activities as a way to improve student learning?

The SALT survey

State's testing program

Preparing for a SALT visit

The SALT post-visit session

The SALT visit itself

Your schools considering and discussing the team's report

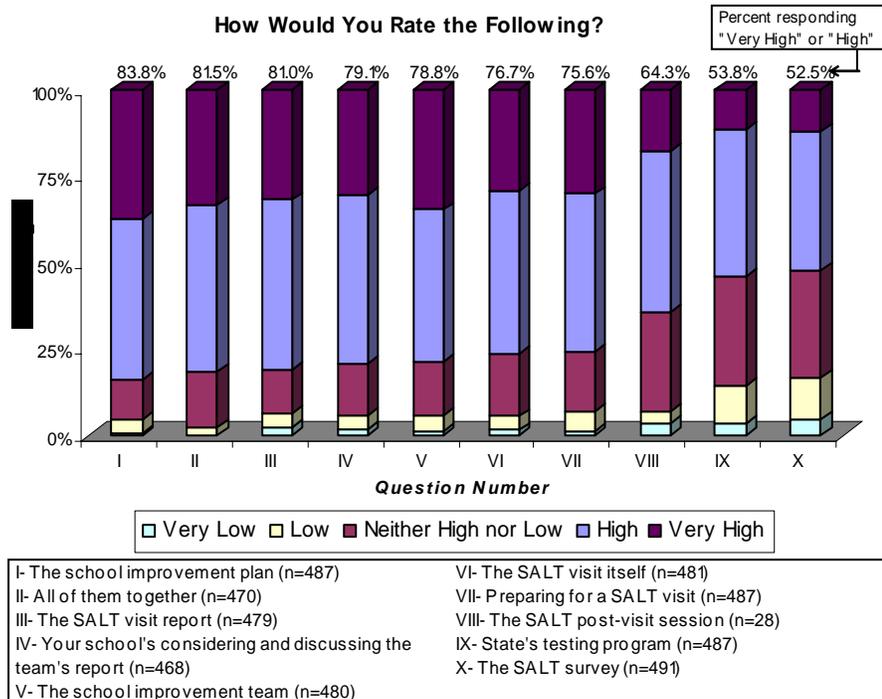
The school improvement plan

The school improvement team

All of them together

Each item rated on a 5 point scale: Very High—Very Low

Figure 21: Effectiveness of SALT Activities for School Improvement



A large portion of respondents (81.5%) rated *All of them (school initiatives) together* as “very high” or “high”—indicating that many participants see a need for a multifaceted approach to school improvement.

Participants rank *The school improvement plan* as the highest (83.8%), followed by *The SALT visit report* (81.0%). *Your schools considering and discussing the team’s report* was not far behind (79.1%), followed by *The school improvement team* (78.8%), *The SALT visit itself* (76.7%), *Preparing for the SALT visit* (75.6%) and *The SALT post-visit session* (64.3%). Participants rated the *State’s testing program* and *The SALT survey* substantially lower (53.8% and 52.5% respectively).

Since *The SALT post-visit session* is a relatively new RIDE initiative (2003), many respondents had had no experience with it. The 28 respondents included in these results are from the only schools that participated in a post-visit session.

Local School Administrators gave *The school improvement team* a higher rating than the group as a whole (from 5th to 2nd) as well as *Preparing for the SALT visit* (from 7th to 4th). *Local School Administrators* also rated *The SALT visit report* relatively lower (from 3rd to 7th).

Parents ranked *The SALT visit itself* much higher than *Others* (from 6th to 1st) and *The school improvement plan* lower (1st to 4th).

While all groups ranked *State’s testing program* low, *Teachers* and *Parents* give it the lowest of their rankings (48.5% & 31.3% respectively vs. 68.8% for the remaining respondents)

Respondents affiliated with an elementary school rank *The school improvement team* higher (from 4th to 2nd) and *The SALT visit report* lower (3rd to 5th) than others. Those affiliated with high schools rank *The SALT visit report* higher (from 3rd to 1st), *The SALT visit itself* lower (3rd to 6th) and *The school improvement team* lower (4th to 7th).

High school affiliated respondents gave *State's testing program* the lowest rating (46.7% vs. 54.5%).

Conclusions

Interpreting these findings on the *Effectiveness of SALT activities for school improvement* raises more puzzles and requires more speculation than is true for most of the other survey themes. Embedded in this question is considerable complexity that goes beyond the data collected. The fact that the underlying issues—how and why schools improve—are fraught with disagreement, ambiguity and uncertainty adds to the difficulties in the analysis. These complexities make it more difficult to be sure about what respondents meant when they selected their responses. A broader population of respondents would also increase clarity, particularly for the post-visit session.

While the answers are not sure, the questions raised by this analysis of this section are important for RIDE and the SALT visit. Here are the key questions in the data that need further work to arrive at reasonably certain answers:

That *All of them together* received the highest percentage of positive responses would suggest that it appears that the respondents accept the value of a “comprehensive” approach to data and accountability that SALT as a system represents. Yet, when they considered each of the components of SALT, they chose answers that differed considerably in how highly they valued each component (range from 83.8% to 48.8%).

The lower ratings for *State's testing program* and *The SALT survey* are not surprising. It is common for there to be a large gap between the perceptions of school practitioners and the advocates for these more conventional methodologies about the usefulness of the data generated. An interesting follow-up question would be “Does the school visit and the overall SALT system increase the value of test and survey data, particularly for school practitioners to take effective action?”

The high ratings for *The SALT Visit report* and *Your school's considering and discussing the team's report* within this system is interesting. Does the similar rating of *The School Improvement Team* suggest that the school's internal discussions about practice are perceived as most valuable? Does it mean that *The SALT visit report* is a particularly useful tool for furthering that discussion? Compared to the other respondents why do *Local School Administrators* rate *The SALT Visit report* lower than the group as a whole and rate *The school improvement team* and *Preparing for a SALT visit* higher? Further questioning would have to take place to be sure of the answers.

Finally, these findings raise questions regarding what the practitioners' perceive to be the value of different types of planning exercises. *The school improvement plan* is rated the highest of any of the choices. While the number of respondents is small, the planning exercise, *The SALT post visit session*, is rated low. This is the exercise that seeks to make deliberate connections for school practitioners between the highly rated visit report and school's School Improvement Plan. Since *The post-visit session* is designed to "discuss the report," the puzzle becomes more complex, given the higher rating of *Your school's considering and discussing the team's report*.

THE FUTURE OF THE SALT VISIT

Introduction

The recent implementation of the SALT visit by RIDE has been recognized on the national scene as an unusual and bold step to make accountability work as a tool to improve student learning in public schools. 'What should be the future of the visit?' is a legitimate question within the department.

During the last seven years, different constituencies have raised questions from time to time about what the future of the visit should be due to its different, intense and rather intrusive nature.

We thought that a systemic accounting of team members' views on the future of the SALT visit would be informative.

Results

We asked two questions about what participants think about a number of possible scenarios regarding the future of the visit. (All of these have been suggested over the seven years.) The first question asked the respondents what they think about the scenario; the second asked them what they think other people think.

We also asked respondents to indicate how they think different constituent groups rate the contribution of the visit to improving Rhode Island education.

What respondents thought about future visit scenarios

Question: All: *How much do you agree with each of these statements about SALT visits?*

The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots.

The Salt visit has proved itself. RIDE should give top priority to its continued use.

The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time.

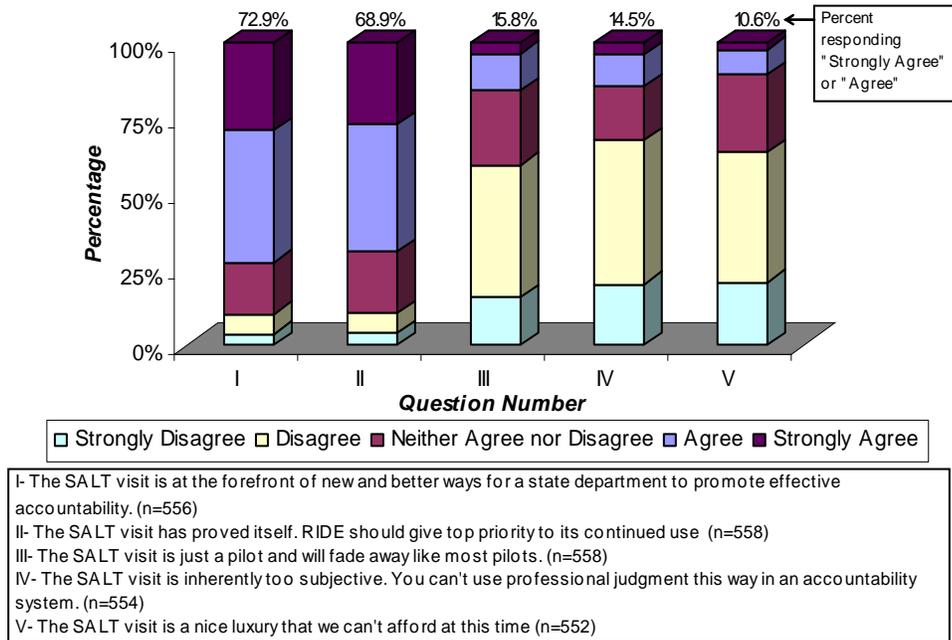
The SALT visit is inherently too subjective. You can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system.

The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability.

Each item rated on 5 point scale: Strongly Agree—Strongly Disagree

Figure 22: What I (the respondent) Think

How Strongly Do You Agree with the Following?



Discussion of what respondents thought

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the scenarios that affirm the value of the SALT visit; they would preserve it in the future, and they overwhelmingly disagreed with the scenarios that suggest the SALT visit should or would disappear.

Nearly 3 in 4 respondents (72.9%) indicated that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that *The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability*. Most participants also agreed that *The Salt visit has proved itself—RIDE should give top priority to its continued use* (68.9%).

The agreement rate dropped dramatically (15.8%) in response to the scenario that *The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots*. It dropped even lower (14.5%) for *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective—you can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system*. The lowest agreement (10.6%) was for *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time*.

Teachers are more likely than other respondents to indicate that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that *The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots* (19.3% vs. 8.6%), while *Local School Administrators* are less likely to agree (7.0% vs. 17.9%). *Teachers* are also more likely than other respondents to say they agree that *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective—you can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system* (15.7% vs. 12.1%).

Parents agree less than other respondents that *The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability*

(66.7% vs. 73.0%). *Parents* are more likely to agree that *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time* (16.7% vs. 10.4%)

Middle/junior high school affiliated participants are in general more positive than respondents affiliated with other school levels about the future of the SALT visit. Most notably, middle/junior high school teachers are less likely to agree that *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time* (6.4% vs. 13.2%) or to indicate that *The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots* (12.7% vs. 19.4%) and more likely to agree that *The SALT visit has proved itself—RIDE should give top priority to its continued use* (72.4% vs. 66.6%).

What respondents thought other people think about the visit's future scenarios

This question was asked again, but this time the respondent was asked to rate what he/she thought other ("most") people think.

Question: All: *How much do most people agree with each of these statements about SALT visits?*

The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots.

The SALT visit has proved itself. RIDE should give top priority to its continued use.

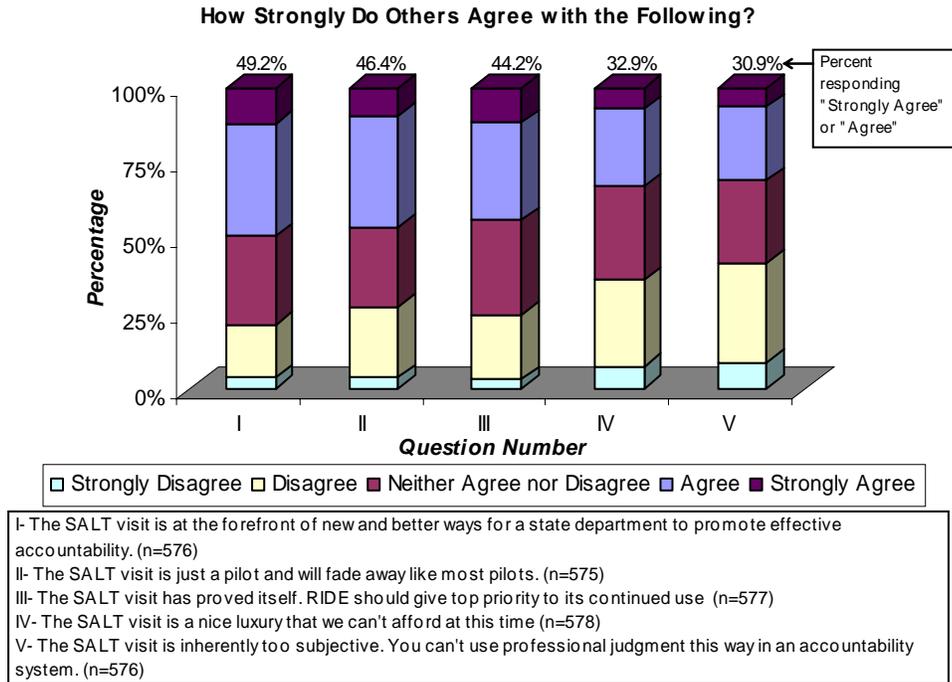
The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time.

The SALT visit is inherently too subjective. You can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system.

The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability.

Each item rated on 5 point scale: Strongly Agree—Strongly Disagree

Figure 23: What Respondents Think Other People Think about the Visit’s Future



Discussion of what respondents think other people think

All comparisons between what respondents thought and what they thought other people thought show that respondents did not think that other people placed as high a value on the future of the visit as they did.

Nearly half of the respondents (49.2%) indicated that they think that others believed that *The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability*. Interestingly, nearly as many (46.4%) indicated that they thought others would agree that *The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots*. This was followed by *The Salt visit has proved itself. RIDE should give top priority to its continued use* (44.2%), and *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time* (32.9%). Respondents thought that others agree least that *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective—you can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system* (30.9%).

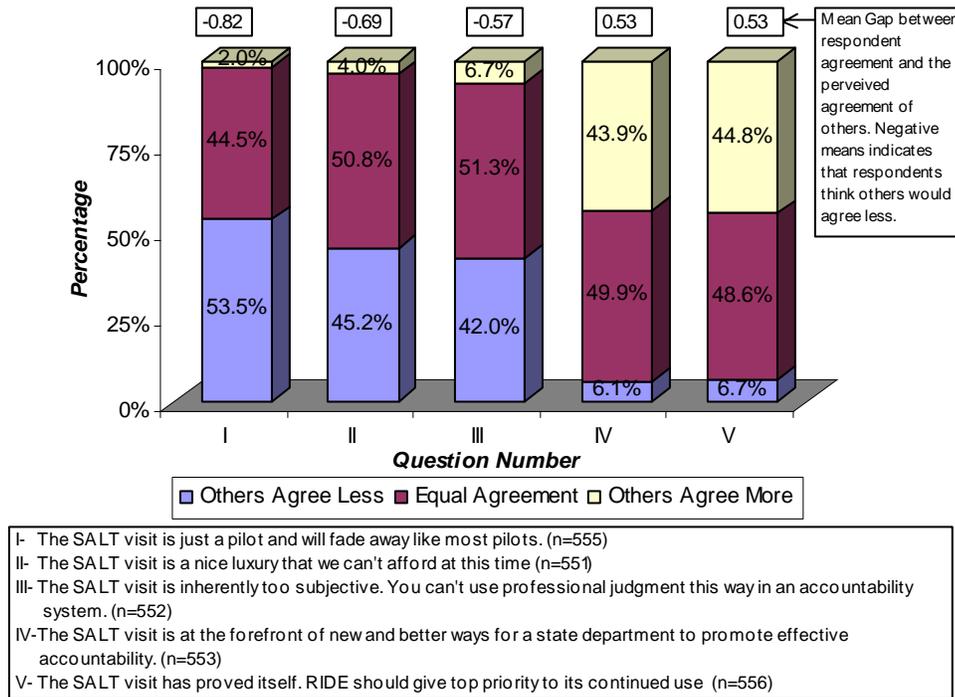
Relative to other questions, there are large differences in how respondents from different professional backgrounds viewed what others thought. *Teachers* are in general more pessimistic than other professional groups about how other people view the SALT visit. For example, *Teachers* are much more likely than other respondents to believe that other people would “agree” or “strongly agree” that *The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots* (52.2% vs. 34.3%) and that *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective—you can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system* (33.3% vs. 24.9%). Similarly, *Teachers* are less likely to believe that other people would agree that *The SALT visit has proved itself—RIDE should give top priority to its continued use* (41.7% vs. 49.7%) and that *The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and*

better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability (47.2% vs. 54.1%).

Local School Administrators and *Other* participants are in general more optimistic about how others view the SALT visit and its future. *Local School Administrators*, in particular, are more likely to believe that others agree that *The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better way to promote effective accountability* (56.9% vs. 47.8%) and that *The SALT visit has proved itself—RIDE should give top priority to its continued use* (52.0% vs. 42.6%). Similarly they are less likely to think that others would agree that *The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots* (33.3% vs. 49.4%) and that *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective—you can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system* (23.5% vs. 32.2%).

There is less variation in responses when the focus shifts from the respondent's professional group membership to the level of the respondent's school. Respondents from secondary schools were less likely to think that others would agree that *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective—you can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system* (22.8% vs. 34.4%), while middle/junior high school affiliated respondents were more likely to believe (38.1% vs. 30.2%). Those affiliated with elementary schools are more likely to think that others would agree that *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time* (36.7% vs. 31.5%) while a secondary school affiliated respondent are less likely to think this (28.3% vs. 35.8%).

Figure 24 How Respondents Perceive the SALT Visit Compared to How They Think Others Perceive It



A gap analysis was conducted in order to measure the difference between what respondent think other people think and their own perceptions about the future of the SALT visit. The analysis indicates that perceptions diverge the most for the scenario—*The SALT visit is just a pilot and will fade away like most pilots* (mean gap score=-0.82). This was followed by *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time* (-0.69). The remaining three scenarios have similar results that indicate on average respondents think that other people would rate the future of the SALT visit a half a rating lower than they would.

The perception gap is lower for *Local School Administrators* across all scenarios. For *Teachers* and *Other* respondents, the gap is much greater. For *Teachers*, the mean gap score is higher for all scenarios, with the greatest difference being for *The SALT visit is inherently too subjective. You can't use professional judgment this way in an accountability system* (-0.60 vs.-0.48) and *The SALT visit is at the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability* (0.55 vs. 0.45). For *Other* respondents the gap is greater for all but one scenario, with the greatest difference occurring for *The SALT visit is a nice luxury that we can't afford at this time* (-0.96 vs. -0.66).

What respondents think members of relevant groups think about the SALT visit

Question: All: How strongly does each of these groups believe that the SALT visit contributes in important ways to improving education in Rhode Island?

Teachers in your school

Administrators in your school

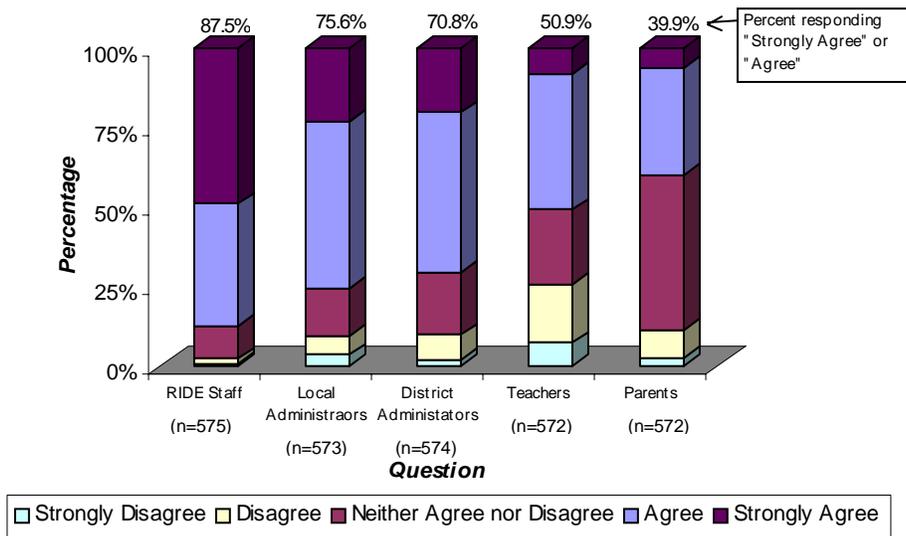
District Administrators

RIDE staff

Parents

Each group rated on 5 point scale:
Strongly Agree—Strongly Disagree—No opinion

Figure 25: Percentage of Respondents Who Think Members of Different Constituent Groups Would Agree that the Visit Has Made Important Contributions



More respondents thought *RIDE staff* would agree that the SALT visit contributes in important ways (87.5%). According to respondents *Local School Administrators* are the next most likely to agree (75.6%), followed by *District Administrators* (70.8%). Perceived agreement for *Teachers in your school* is roughly 20 point lower (50.9%). *Parents* received the lowest rating (39.9%—“agree” or “strongly agree”).

Respondents are more likely to indicate that *Teachers in your school* would disagree that the SALT visit contributes in important ways (25.7% vs 8.0%—mean for other four groups).

Teachers themselves appear to be more pessimistic of others’ impressions of the SALT visit. While a teacher respondent sees *Teachers in your school* as agreeing at about the same level as the respondent (49.6% vs. 53.1%), they are less likely than other respondents to indicate that *District Administrators* would agree that *The SALT visit contributes in important ways* (68.4% vs. 75.3%) and are also less likely to indicate that *Local Administrators* would agree (73.7% vs. 79.3%). In contrast, *Teachers* think that *Others* are more likely to agree (81.3% vs. 69.5%).

Other respondents were more likely to think that *Parents* would agree (52.1% vs. 38.9%).

Respondents affiliated with secondary schools are less likely to indicate that *Teachers* would “agree” or “strongly agree” that *The SALT visit contributes in important ways* (36.7% vs. 53.8%). Middle school affiliated respondents are more likely to indicate that *Parents* would agree (36.7% vs. 53.8%).

Conclusions

Survey respondents indicate that they believe the SALT visit should have a strong future. They believe “The SALT visit is on the forefront of new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability,” (72.9%—net-agreement) that it has proved itself (68.9—net-agreement). They do **not** agree with the argument that the use of professional judgment makes the visit inherently too subjective to be used for accountability purposes (67.7%—net-disagreement) and that the visit is a luxury that the state cannot afford (64%—net-disagreement) or that the visit is still a pilot (59.6%—net-disagreement).

Many survey respondents believe that “most [other] people” do not value the visit as highly as they do and that “most [other] people” are not as optimistic about its future. Considering five future scenarios for the future of the visit, the differences between respondents’ responses about themselves and about “most [other] people” can be seen in Figure 27.

While a relatively high proportion of *Teachers* indicated earlier that they value the visit as the most powerful professional development they have experienced, more *Teachers* than members of the other professional groupings believe that other people and professional groups assign a lower value to the visit than they do. They are also more pessimistic about its survival. This *Teacher* gap in perceptions appears again in the rating of all respondents about the views of different groups that placed *Teachers in your school* at the bottom of the professional groups in believing that the visit has educational value.

Closely related to this is that, while *Local School Administrators* do not rate the visit quite so highly as a tool for their own professional development as *Teachers* do, they are more likely to believe that the visit has a future.

While many of the noted differences between the different professional groups of respondents and the different school levels of respondents are interesting, further study will be necessary to draw certain conclusions.

RESPONDENTS' INTEREST IN CONTINUING THEIR INVOLVEMENT

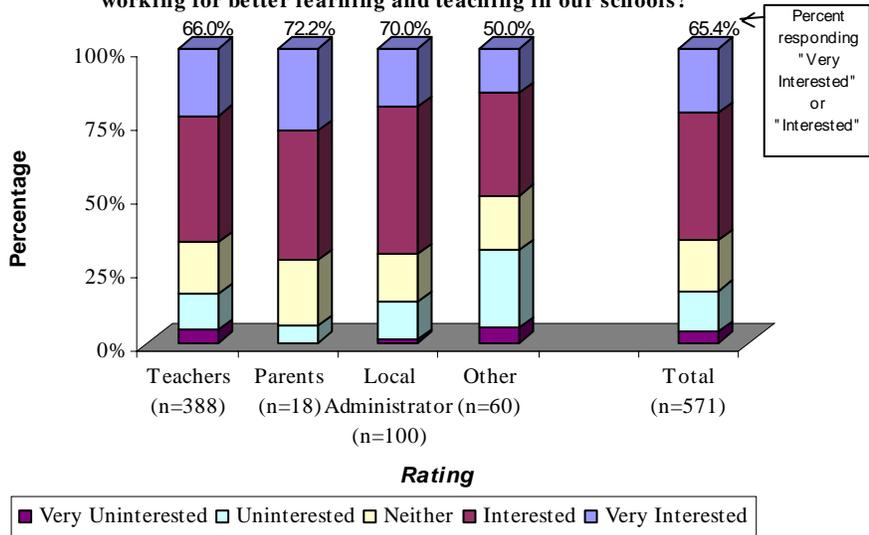
The final question asked respondents if they were interested in participating in an electronic network associated with SALT.

Question: All: *How interested would you be in participating in an electronic network that supported SALT team members and other SALT participants in working for better learning and teaching in our schools?*

Very Interested or Interested, Somewhat Interested, Not Interested—No Response

Figure 26: Interest in Participating in Electronic Network

How interested would you be in participating in an electronic network that supported SALT team members and other SALT participants in working for better learning and teaching in our schools?



This level of interest is higher than Catalpa Ltd. expected. The comment section after this question did elicit a large number of comments that qualified respondents' answers. They would be interested, if the web tool were well designed and useful to their ongoing work.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

The response rate to the survey by team members is 43.1%. Since this is a population study (not a sample study), statistical comparisons were not used in the analysis. Respondents do represent the study's population well on all the tested dimensions: professional background, school level and year of participation on a SALT team, as well as whether the participant's home school has been visited.

Respondents highly rate the experience of participating on a SALT visit team. 92.2% rate the visit experience as either "excellent" or "very good." 94.6% say they would "certainly" recommend the visit to their peers.

Respondents gave the report their team wrote high scores on the SALT visit criteria for report validity. The percentage of respondents who rated each criteria "excellent" or "very good" follow: *Accuracy*—95.4 %, *Fairness*—92.9%, *Usefulness*—92.6%, *Persuasiveness*—87.6%. If they were affiliated with a school that had received a SALT visit report, more rated their school's report lower than their team's report on these criteria (40% lower, 49% the same and 11% higher).

A large majority of *Teachers* and *Local School Administrators* think that the SALT visit is an unusually powerful professional development experience. 80.9% of the *Teachers* and 74.0% of the *Local School Administrators* pronounced the SALT visit as the *most powerful professional development experience* they have ever had.

The aspects of the visit that most respondents see as the most valuable relate to the visit as a methodology for inquiring about how and how well a school works. Respondents in all groups rated items that related only to school improvement without inquiry about schools at lower levels.

While *Parents* and *Others* did not rate the visit as professional development, both groups did rate the visit as *a way to learn what goes on in schools*. Most *Parents* and *Others* rated this dimension as "very high" or "high" (94.4% and 90.2%). *Parents* and *Others* also see the value of the visit as inquiry.

Findings about the *Effectiveness of SALT activities for school improvement* created a number of puzzles. The complexity and uncertainty about how schools do, in fact, improve made it more difficult to be sure of what respondents meant by their responses. For example, respondents rated *all of them [SALT activities] together* with the second highest percentage of positive responses (81.5%). This suggests that respondents accept the value of a "comprehensive" approach to data and accountability that SALT, as a system, represents. Yet, when they considered each of the components of SALT, their answers did not have the consistency that one would expect, if a person saw it as a consistent, effective system.

Respondents chose answers for each of the different components that gave a range

of positive responses about the effectiveness of the components from 83.8% to 52.5%.

The lower ratings for *State's testing program* and the *SALT survey* are not surprising. It is common for there to be a large gap between the perceptions of school practitioners and the advocates for these more conventional methodologies about the usefulness of the data generated. An interesting follow-up question would be "Does the SALT visit increase the value of test and survey data, particularly for school practitioners taking action to improve their school?"

Survey respondents indicate that they believe the SALT visit should have a strong future. They believe the SALT visit is on the forefront of "new and better ways for a state department to promote effective accountability," (72.9%) that it has proved itself (68.9). They do **not** agree with the argument that the use of professional judgment makes the visit inherently too subjective to be used for accountability purposes (67.7%). They do **not** agree that the visit is a luxury that the state cannot afford (64%) or that the visit is still a pilot (59.6%).

Survey respondents believe that "most [other] people" are not as optimistic about its future. Considering five future scenarios for the future of the visit, the differences between respondents' responses about themselves and about "most [other] people" range from 23 to 39.6 percentage points.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RIDE

Team member participants confirm RIDE's investment in the SALT visit's different approach to school assessment. This success presents RIDE with the problem of how best to use this new tool. In its plans for maximizing the value of the visit as an accountability and school support tool, RIDE should carefully consider how to maximize the value that team members assign to the visit as effective professional development. The importance of the visit as legitimate inquiry about school practice by school practitioners should be at the center of this consideration.

RIDE should consider the implications of the large gap between the high ratings that team members give to the value of the visit and the lower ratings they give to how they think "most others" view the visit. This gap seems particularly important for teachers. This may explain some of the dynamics in the public discussion about the value of the visit and does play a role in schools response to the visit. It certainly does not support that teachers are opposed to the visit. Rather, it supports that when teachers know about the visit and how it works, they become strong supporters of its value. This may suggest somewhat different priorities for how RIDE explains the visit to the public and for how it can best maximize the value of the visit in an overall program of school accountability and support.

APPENDIX

THE SALT VISIT

Purpose for SALT visits

The SALT school visit is a direct result of the unusual leadership of the Rhode Island Department of Education to find better ways for a state department of education to assure that public schools make important gains in student learning.

In 1997 the Board of Regents for public education in Rhode Island sought to redefine school accountability so that it could be an effective tool for school improvement. The set of accountability principles that were adopted by the Regents at that time led directly to the generation of a system of school accountability called SALT: School Accountability for Learning and Teaching. The SALT school visit is an important component of the SALT system.

SALT was conceived as an “information system to improve schools.” RIDE instituted the SALT visit as a way to generate knowledge about what actually happens in schools and classrooms and how that school practice plays out in terms of student learning.

The visit mutually supports and works in concert with other SALT components, which include: the School Self-Study, the School Improvement Plan and post-visit revision of School Improvement Plan. The full cycle of SALT components is designed to ensure dramatic progress in student learning.

RIDE engaged Catalpa Ltd. to work on the design of the SALT visit so that it would take advantage of Catalpa’s research on how British school inspection and other visiting approaches actually work and how these century old approaches to school measurement could meet modern ideas of rigor in procuring and disseminating information.

After working with senior RIDE staff, Rhode Island teachers and the teachers who became the cadre of SALT chairs, Catalpa has identified the principles that make a peer team visit rigorous. The SALT visit is the most advanced of current visit protocols in meeting Catalpa’s Practice-based Inquiry® principals.⁷

While the central purpose was to design a methodologically rigorous approach to assessing school performance, it was clear from the beginning that the different approach of the visit held other important benefits for the Department.

⁷ A fuller discussion of the history, purpose of the SALT visit and the Practice-based Inquiry® is found in *Handbook for SALT Visit Chairs*, 2nd edition, Catalpa Ltd and RIDE, 2005.

Rigorous protocol

The knowledge gained from the SALT visit serves many complex purposes and offers many benefits:

- ◆ It pointedly addresses the central question of accountability for each school: “How well is this school doing at its central task, student learning?”
- ◆ It provides the school and RIDE with a coherent report that contains the conclusions that an outside group of professional peers has decided best represents the central issues shaping the school’s performance. These conclusions are set within the three SALT focus areas: Learning, Teaching for Learning and School Support for Learning and Teaching. The visit team identifies the most important and immediate issues that it thinks the school faces in improving its teaching and learning.
- ◆ It provides a critical tool for the school for planning how it can immediately strengthen its teaching and learning practice.
- ◆ It provides RIDE, the school district, parents and concerned citizens with a timely, coherent, legitimate public report on how well a school is performing.
- ◆ It supplements established information systems with one that focuses directly on the complexities of actual classroom and school practice.
- ◆ It provides school practitioners with a unique and important professional development opportunity.

Why the SALT Visit Works

The SALT visit works because it is built on the principles of Practice-based Inquiry^{®8}. Distinguishing attributes of the SALT visit include:

- ◆ SALT visits generate school-based knowledge that contributes to the objectives of both accountability and school-support.
- ◆ The SALT visit team seeks to understand the particular attributes and dynamics of the host school and deliberately avoids comparing one school with another.
- ◆ The team has the explicit charge to build conclusions that are both accurate and useful for the school.
- ◆ The team builds the substance of its conclusions from what it learns about what is actually happening in the school and what school participants think about what is happening in their school.

⁸ Practice-based Inquiry[®] is a registered trademark of Catalpa Ltd.

- ◆ How human perspective shapes knowledge is critical to the design of any information system. The procedures of the visit ensure the balance and utility of the team's perspective.
- ◆ The team uses what it has learned about a school to shape the wording of its conclusions so that they will effectively support and provoke the school to take immediate and productive steps to improve its learning performance. The school comes to understand that the team's report is useful because it directly expresses what it thinks in a unanimous voice and in language that school practitioners understand.
- ◆ The team integrates state standards for learning and the results of state assessments of student learning and other sources of information, such as the SALT survey, into its analysis. These are used as important reference points for considering how well a school is building an effective, standards-based approach to teaching and learning. While a team frequently will discuss how well a school is doing against the performance of schools statewide, it does not compare schools or districts.
- ◆ Team members build conclusions from their usually untapped knowledge, skills and wisdom as school practitioners. This provides a basis for increasing practitioner knowledge, skills and wisdom.
- ◆ During the course of a visit, team members come to understand that a professional who wants to improve her practice will value the accurate observation of her classroom-in-action by a group of peers.
- ◆ The team sustains itself during its long hours and complex work by its intense fascination with trying to solve the puzzle of what to say about the school. This work is further supported by the professional aspirations of team members, as school practitioners, to better understand and improve their own practice. These aspirations are often overlooked in modern accountability plans.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Available upon request to Catalpa Ltd.

EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK REPORTS ON SALT VISIT

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Interim Report: Feedback on SALT Process from Five Schools.

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School Compact Focus Group Summary. Marilyn Crocker, Marilyn Crocker Associates, March 2000.

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