

# THE RESULTS ARE IN

## EXAMPLES OF CONCLUSIONS FROM PRACTICE BASED INQUIRY® SCHOOL VISIT TEAM REPORTS

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the PBI collection

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Bringing Professional Practice into Focus

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### **The PBI™ Collection**

*Answers to the Basic Questions about Practice-Based Inquiry®* is a brief introduction and overview to Practice-Based Inquiry.

*Foundations and Components of Practice-Based Inquiry®* is published by Catalpa Ltd. as part of a series that explains both the conceptual and practical dimensions of Practice-Based Inquiry. It presents a comprehensive description of PBI definitions, assumptions and underlying concepts. It considers the place of PBI in the historical tradition of professional practice. Its central focus is how PBI works as a legitimate methodology that generates accurate and legitimate findings about the quality of professional practice. Its thorough and authoritative discussion of Practice-Based Inquiry provides the details necessary for understanding its value and its use as a research tool.

### **Handbooks for Catalpa Services**

Catalpa is proud to provide services to help clients claim and use Practice-Based Inquiry. The following handbooks describe the stipulations and procedures for Catalpa services: protocol accreditation, chair certification and visit report endorsement, as well as the outlines for how a Center can be licensed to use PBI®.

*Assuring the Legitimacy of Practice-Based Inquiry® Visits: The Preparation, Review and Certification of a PBI™ Visit Protocol.*

*Assuring the Legitimacy of Practice-Based Inquiry® Visits: Certification of PBI™ Visit Team Chairs and Visit Team Members.*

*Assuring the Legitimacy of Practice-Based Inquiry®: Endorsing PBI™ Visit Team Reports.*

*Assuring the Legitimacy of Practice-Based Inquiry®: Accrediting and Licensing PBI™ Centers.*

### **Guides to Ensuring the Legitimacy of PBI™ Visits**

Catalpa offers a growing series of guides on how to design, conduct and follow-up on a PBI™ visit.

#### **Catalpa's website ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org))**

Catalpa's website provides a comprehensive set of resources for those interested in Practice-Based Inquiry. The website provides further examples, details, links to documents and other relevant websites, as well as references to other studies and descriptive documents. These include access to visit reports prepared by PBI visit teams, studies and discussions of the benefits of PBI, and *Handbooks* and *Guides* about how to ensure the value and rigor of Practice-Based Inquiry. Finally, the site offers the opportunity to join Catalpa's member list for updates about Catalpa and school visits.

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## INTRODUCTION

The most powerful way to judge the value of a methodology is to assess the results it generates. Critical analysis of actual team conclusion is an essential tool for monitoring the effectiveness of the protocol and for chair professional development.

Results that would show that a methodology has little or no value include:

Results that are wrong, or

Results that are inaccurate, or

Results that are trivial.

The indicators of a solid methodology are not so easily summarized. Catalpa Ltd. claims that Practice-Based Inquiry® is a solid methodology that generates certain and legitimate conclusions about the complex interactions that define professional practice.

The visit team pays careful attention to language, using active and direct constructions. When a visit team writes a conclusion, it tests the conclusion's validity by reaching a consensus agreement that the conclusion meets the following tests:

Is this conclusion accurate? The evidence must be accurate in the team's judgment. The team must list at least two "sources of evidence" that were used in deciding that conclusion. (In practice, teams usually list at least four sources of evidence.)

Is this conclusion important enough to include in this report? Most protocols set the maximum number of conclusions at 5 for each focus area.

Did we make what we think about the issue of this conclusion explicit? The team must agree in its judgment about how well the school is performing on that issue.

Is this conclusion set in the present? The team usually uses present tense verbs. The team avoids using the past as a causal agent for present conditions, and it does not speculate about how well the school will do in the future.

In addition, after it has drafted its body of conclusions, the team applies additional tests about the report as a whole:

Is the report fair to the major constituencies of the school (students, teachers, administrators and parents)? Does it address important equity issues?

Based on the team's understanding of the dynamic of the school, does the team think the report is as persuasive as the team can make it for the main actors at the school?

Can the school practitioners use the conclusions and recommendations in the report to improve learning and teaching at this school? This disallows recommendations that are beyond the school's control or that require unlikely conditions, such as an unlikely hike in costs.

For a full discussion of conclusions and the other components of PBI, see *Foundations and Components of Practice-Based Inquiry*<sup>®</sup>. (Catalpa Ltd., 2009)

The following examples of actual conclusions from the thousands that have been written by Practice-Based Inquiry<sup>®</sup> (PBI) school visit teams provide a basis for considering the authenticity of Catalpa's claims. This more or less random collection has been selected across protocols and types of schools.

Four sample *Portraits* from actual visit reports follow the conclusions. The team writes the *Portrait* of the school on the last day of the visit, after it has its conclusions well in hand. The team is asked to see the Portrait as a statement "of the current condition of learning and teaching at this school" that makes clear to the school what the team thinks is most important for the school to hear and know.

All the school teams that wrote these conclusions were dominated by practicing teachers. All but one were chaired by a practicing teacher.

## CONCLUSIONS ABOUT STUDENT LEARNING

### MIDDLE-HIGH SCHOOL: MATH

Students are not learning mathematics at a deep level. They use imprecise language to discuss mathematical concepts, and their discussion focuses on procedures. Students learn basic skills, but they do not know how to use them in real and changing contexts. For example, middle school students know how to compute basic operations in fractions, decimals and proportion at great speed, but they lack knowledge of how these operations are connected, and they do not understand the underlying mathematical constructs or their purpose. Students in the high school learn a different set of skills than those they learned in middle school, yet they also lack knowledge of the connections among operations, and they do not understand the underlying mathematical constructs or their purpose. Additionally, they are not able to apply middle school skills to new situations; for example, students are unable to use ratios in science class and in math class they do not know how to simplify their rational expressions. Their test scores in math skills are well below the state norms. *(reviewing student work; observing classes; talking with teachers and students; meeting with instructional leaders and principal; reviewing state test scores; reviewing quarterly outlines)*

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: PROJECT LEARNING

Students are sometimes involved in lively discussions, applying knowledge to real life situations, role-playing, working creatively in fine arts, and participating in energetic physical education classes. Students conduct experiments, utilize computer technology to complete various assignments, and communicate at a basic level in foreign language classes. However, students primarily demonstrate their learning through rote, low-level thinking, simplistic projects, and passive, non-participatory activities exemplified by completing worksheets, extended reviewing of homework, defining vocabulary words in class, copying information from various sources, and providing basic responses to factual questions. Also, students are involved in off task behaviors such as chatting, doodling, and sleeping. Often, students are not engaged in the learning process. *(following students, classroom observations, meetings with students and parents)*

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: STUDENTS AS LEARNERS

Students are persistent, motivated, curious learners who think and work independently, as well as collaboratively. They are not afraid to make mistakes. They confidently speak in front of their classmates, both in their classrooms and at monthly Town Meetings, proudly sharing poems, paintings and songs related to what they have learned. They believe their opinions are valued. Open discussions and affirming comments among and from peers and teachers reflect this belief. Students work together and learn from one another. Most importantly, they hold themselves accountable to produce high quality work and consistently challenge themselves to “put (their) brains to the test.” Student reflections show that students think about what they have learned and that they set goals for their personal improvement. They question their thinking, test new ideas and use this information to extend their knowledge. This thinking process is embedded in the way they learn. Parents report, and the visit team agrees, that students here are happy, confident, successful learners. *(following students, observing classes, observing the school outside the classroom, meeting with students, parents and district administrators, talking with students and teachers, 2004 School Survey report)*

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: READING

Students at this school read often and can answer literal comprehension questions well. They read confidently, value reading, and show pride in their reading accomplishments. They borrow books from the library with gusto! Students eagerly read during silent reading time and at home, faithfully completing their reading logs. When reading aloud, they read with fluency and the correct intonation. Students use picture walks, predictions, and whispering into acoustiphones to assist their understanding of texts. Many students independently use the five-finger rule to choose books of appropriate reading difficulty. Students say they are good or excellent readers because they read often and read books with chapters. Eighty-eight percent of students met or exceeded the standard for the Reading: Basic Understanding subtest of the state testing program. While most students enthusiastically discuss their reading with one another, most questions they discuss have answers that can be found directly in the text. They have not mastered the skills that would enable them to interpret text thoughtfully. Instead, they remain content to recall

factual information. The decline in students meeting or exceeding the standard on the Analysis and Interpretation subtest of the state testing program reflects this. *(following students, observing classes, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, school improvement plan, 2004 state testing results, meeting with the school improvement team, students, and parents, talking with students)*

## HIGH SCHOOL: WRITING

Students write on a wide array of levels that range in quality progressing from expressing vague ideas and using poor mechanics to developing concepts well and producing excellent written pieces. Some students write very well. This excellent student writing includes pieces that contain main ideas with well-organized supporting details. It also contains fluent sentences that have minimal mechanical errors. This writing typically shows students making effective connections between what they are learning in school and what is happening in the world around them. In contrast, many other students produce writing that lacks clarity, well developed ideas, sophistication, content-specific vocabulary, proper grammar, and writing conventions. These students primarily write literal answers to questions or prompts on their worksheets, but they struggle to develop more complex and coherent work. Their writing is choppy and employs simple vocabulary and sentence structure. These students say they do not like to write because writing is difficult, and they do not understand either the purpose or the need to write. This may help explain why 56% of the students achieved below standard on the writing effectiveness subtest of the 2005 State Testing Results. *(following students, observing classes, observing the school outside of the classroom, talking with students and teachers, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, discussing student work with teachers, reviewing classroom assessments, 2005 State Testing Results, Summaries, Large High School Self-Study)*

## CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TEACHING

### HIGH SCHOOL: TEACHING IN GENERAL

Teachers enjoy an amicable relationship with students, administrators and each other. They show a sincere and nurturing attitude toward their students. Many of them make themselves available to the students beyond their contractual obligations. *(classroom and school observations, following students, meetings with students, administrators, and parents, review of the 1999-2002 Contract Agreement between the Teachers and and the School Committee)*

Despite these professional strengths, many teachers have low expectations for both their students and themselves. These expectations result in a lack of academic rigor at all levels. The reliance on teacher-centered instruction and traditional practices, inconsistently assigned and unchallenging homework, and ineffective use of instructional time and materials all contribute to low student performance and complacency on the part of both students and teachers. *(classroom observations, following students, examination of student work, meetings with students, and parents, 2000 State tests, review of the School Support System Report Plan for the District's School System, January, 2000)*

### HIGH SCHOOL: TEACHING IN GENERAL

Most classrooms are teacher-centered. Teachers take primary responsibility for the learning that goes on in their classrooms, rather than foster climates where students will take responsibility for their own learning. Even when teachers do structure their classes to buttress students to take responsibility, they often pull back without making sure their students have the skills to complete the task well, and/or they step-in too soon, hold their students' hands and walk them to the right answers. Although teachers ask students many questions, these often require only simple, factual answers and do not provoke students to analyze or make connections. Even when teachers ask questions that require students to think more deeply, they do not give students adequate time to ensure a thoughtful response. A culture of struggle does not often exist within the formal class periods. Students have learned that they don't need to struggle, because they know, if they wait long enough or ask for help, the teacher will fully oblige. *(following students, observing classes, talking with students, teachers and deans)*

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: WRITING

Many teachers teach students to write well. These teachers provide clear expectations for writing through structured lessons, the use of models, and agreed-upon criteria. They effectively guide students through the entire writing process, conference with them, provide them with timely and ongoing feedback, and encourage them to improve their work. Some teachers teach writing fairly well. These teachers use many of these good practices, but not as effectively; therefore, the results are not as good. They struggle to connect all the components of the writing process or provide enough ongoing support and feedback. Some other teachers provide ineffective writing instruction, supply insufficient opportunities for students to write, grade writing inconsistently, and assign writing assignments, rather than teach their students how to write well. Most teachers do not effectively teach students to use or apply proper writing conventions independently and consistently. Teachers like the clarity of the writing curriculum and the training provided to implement it, but they express concerns about its rigidity and pace. *(following students, observing classes, observing the school outside of the classroom, meeting school and district administrators, talking with students, teachers, and school administrators, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, discussing student work with teachers, reviewing classroom assessments, reviewing school improvement plan)*

## HIGH SCHOOL: READING

Some teachers are effectively using various teaching strategies and multiple texts to improve reading comprehension. This is evident in classrooms where they admirably implement pre reading, reading, and post reading strategies. They stress analytical or critical thinking skills, requiring students to dig deeper in the reading for analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of ideas. Some teachers do not teach these necessary strategies. This is apparent across academic levels based upon teacher assumptions about their students' needs. Teachers instruct reading more explicitly in general studies classes. In the college career preparatory level, the amount of reading instruction decreases, while in the honors and AP level, this instruction is essentially absent. Test scores corroborate what the team observes in the classroom. Even though 72% of the students achieved the standard in the area of reading analysis and interpretation, a mere 6% achieved the standard with honors. *(following students, observing classes, meeting with school improvement team and the leadership team, talking with students and teachers, reviewing completed and ongoing student work,*

*discussing student work with teachers, reviewing classroom assessments, reviewing 2005 Survey results, reviewing 2005 State Testing Results)*

## MIDDLE SCHOOL: PROBLEM SOLVING

Teachers provide many opportunities for students to solve basic problems. They teach, guide, and model how to solve these problems in a singular, step-by-step method. They incorporate these activities into their teaching, allowing students to practice. To help students succeed at these routine problems, they provide time, tools, and supports, and they hold students accountable for completing the problems. While some teachers explicitly and effectively teach students how to solve complex and challenging problems, most do so less effectively. Many teachers present only basic problems for their students to solve. Some may present problems to students, but they are too quick to provide the answers. Some miss opportunities to identify problems or to integrate them into their instruction. Some teachers emphasize single entry points, methods, or strategies and, they teach in a way that ensures that students will come up with uniform products or solutions. This school typically equates problem solving with the math 'problem of the week.' This narrow view of problem solving inhibits the integration of problem solving across the curriculum. It also limits student exposure to the rigorous and challenging problems that are necessary if they are to become independent lifelong learners. *(following students, observing classes, meeting students, talking with students, teachers, and school administrators, reviewing completed and ongoing student work, discussing student work with teachers, reviewing classroom assessments, reviewing school improvement plan, reviewing self-study)*

## CONCLUSIONS ABOUT SCHOOL SUPPORT FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

### HIGH SCHOOL: ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

The principal has led the dramatic transformation of this school in response to the 1996 NEASC report. He has been instrumental in creating a climate of courtesy and respect, cooperation and pride. He has recognized the extent to which the community, teachers, and students were ready for change, and has taken several steps that have begun to move this school forward. With his administrative team and teacher leaders, he has introduced programs and initiatives to improve student achievement and recognizes that reform at this school is a work in progress. *(Conversations and interviews with students, teachers, staff, parents, school and district administrators, scheduled meetings with students, parents, School Improvement Team, school and district administrators, review of New England Association of Schools and Colleges' 1996 report to this school, observations of the school)*

### MIDDLE SCHOOL: SCHOOL CLIMATE

... This [school's] climate is charged with confusion, resentment and open hostility. Poor communication among the adults and their unwillingness to cooperate are the catalysts for this. As a result, the focus on students, effective instruction and academic achievement has been lost. Teachers are preoccupied with their resentment toward the new administration and the amount of change expected of them. The administrators are overwhelmed by discipline issues, the need to improve academic rigor and the implementation of their plan. While both sides point a finger at the other, neither seems to be able to find a common ground or a way to move this school forward. *(following students, observing classes, observing the school outside of the classroom, meeting with school improvement team, students, school and district administrators, and parents, talking with students, teachers and school administrators, 2004 SALT Survey report)*

## ELEMENTARY: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Site Council at this school has prepared a school improvement plan that is remarkable in its simplicity. They have taken a state requirement and shaped their plan to meet their needs, based it on data, and expanded it to include individual action plans that teachers actually use to drive their daily instruction. *(meeting with Hope Valley Elementary School Site Council, Hope Valley Elementary School Improvement Plan, classroom observations)*

## EXCERPTS FROM PORTRAITS

Note: The team writes the school *Portrait* after it has after it has agreed to its conclusions. A *Portrait* is the team's summary of what it has decided are the most important issues to raise for the school. It appears in the report before the sections of conclusions.

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

When one enters the school, one sees it come alive with smiling faces and quiet chattering voices speaking English or Spanish. Hallways and stairways are lined with pictures and photographs documenting the history of the school and its surrounding neighborhood, as well as honoring the heritage of its culturally diverse student body, faculty and staff. ...

Students are showing gains in reading, writing and math, but their progress is slow. Teachers struggle to meet the wide range of student needs within their classrooms. District mandates override many site-based decisions regarding teaching and learning. Teachers are overwhelmed by the many new district initiatives, an overabundance of testing and the rigid district-mandated schedule for the units of study. ...

### HIGH SCHOOL

...As in many [of this state's] high schools, excellence and indifference coexist. Walk into one classroom, and witness students and teachers involved in the hard work of learning: students take notes, read texts and present projects as a community of learners, who work together to develop critical reading, writing, and thinking skills. Move to a second classroom, and see students who are not engaged in the learning process and who tune out the voice of the teacher as the never-ending lecture continues.

More important than this divergence is the sense of urgency that exists here. After a year of controversy and changes in administrators, as well as in staff, the high school has begun to rebuild itself. Students want to be challenged. Teachers want to improve instruction. Mutual respect among all within the school is quite evident. This school community is poised to make significant changes to improve student learning and teaching.

The overall condition of the facility is, at best, fair. There is evidence that this school building is past its prime: ... Community support will be necessary to alleviate these shortcomings. Gaining this support is currently a challenge.

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

Fred Clarke is a large and complex, urban middle school. The red brick and granite columned building provides a calm and serious face to the more than 900 students, parents, community members, faculty, staff, and administrators who enter its doors each day. Yet, recent and significant transitions and challenges have shaken the school and threaten the stability and health of its foundations—its students, faculty, and administration.

Most students value learning and come here to be educated to fulfill their goals to go on to high school and college and to pursue the futures of their dreams. While some realize their hopes and receive a quality education, many others do not. Most students do not read, write, or problem solve at proficient levels, and many are disengaged from learning. Further, a culture of disrespect exists among many students that results from their disengagement and interferes with the learning of all.

Teachers care about their students and say they want to teach at this school and see it improve. They also speak about their cohesiveness and how they have held the school together in face of its recent transitions. While some are effective teachers, who provide excellent instruction that is relevant, engaging, and thoughtfully designed to help their students grow and achieve, not all reach these high standards. Too many teachers do not have high expectations for their students. They do not provide relevant instruction that leads to significant achievement or manage their classrooms in ways that prevent or minimize behavior problems.

A significant transition at Fred Clarke Middle School is the new administrative team. While this team has a plan and a vision, the entire school community waits cautiously to see if they can make their vision a reality. In addition to the roadblocks of unsatisfactory student learning and behavior and inconsistent instruction and classroom management, the administrative team also identifies central challenges such as scheduling problems that preclude the best middle school practices, the delivery of services to ESL/bilingual and special needs students and the need to build capacity within the school building.

Still other challenges beset this school and call out for solutions— involving more parents and community partners, harnessing professional development to serve the needs of the faculty, and

focusing the many district policies and initiatives. However, no challenge is greater than bringing to life the themes represented by the three totems newly carved and located in the central hall—the eagle, fox, and turtle, representing *respect*, *courage*, and *leadership*.

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Children are the center of what goes on at Otis School. Colorful displays of student artwork line every corridor, and faculty, staff, and volunteers make everyone feel welcome. Children pass through these corridors feeling safe and important. They take responsibility for their learning and behavior not only in the classroom, but also on the playground and at student run assemblies.

Every moment at Otis School is an educational moment. The members of the Otis School Community demonstrate a thorough understanding of the basic tenets inherent in quality learning and teaching. The faculty, staff, and principal are dedicated to providing an environment that is rich in opportunities for student growth. The exceptional collegiality and inviting atmosphere establish an environment conducive to student learning. Teachers are open to new learning opportunities and work hard to maintain their professional edge. They have skillfully and enthusiastically spearheaded initiatives in reading, writing, and problem solving. Strategies of instruction are embedded across the curriculum, and collaborative teaching models serve as effective designs to support student learning.

The principal is well liked by teachers and parents. His door is always open, and he regularly visits the school classrooms. Everyone in the school community feels supported by his leadership. On the other hand, teachers want more information about district decisions that directly affect their instruction and more say in these decisions.

The school enjoys a cadre of dedicated parents who support the school initiatives with their time and their participation. Their commitment to extending learning through enrichment-based activities is evidenced by their support of these programs.

Everyone here holds high expectations for themselves and for the students.