



**Tri-State
Consortium**

**TRI-STATE CONSORTIUM
WAPPINGERS VISIT REPORT**

April 25-27, 2007

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District Visit Information

District Wappingers Central School District

Superintendent Richard Powell

Focus English/Language Arts K-12

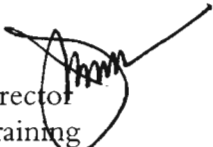
Dates of Visit April 25-27, 2007

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Executive Summary

PURPOSE OF THE VISIT

The Wappingers Central School District invited a Tri-State visit team to review its K-12 English/Language Arts program on April 25-27, 2007. The Tri-State Consortium is a learning organization comprised of suburban districts from New York, Connecticut and New Jersey. It is dedicated to supporting its members in the pursuit of and continued commitment to excellence through the application of an assessment framework that focuses on 15 systems-improvement indicators related to student performance, internal and external system supports. Each indicator calls for evidence to describe the district's plan or approach relative to the indicator, the degree to which the plan has been implemented by teachers and administrators, and the student performance results attributable, in part, to the implementation of the plan.

Wappingers Central School District, in its "quest to attain its vision through a systems approach to ongoing improvement," and to hold itself to standards of excellence characteristic of high performing learning organizations, has devoted three years to the study and application of the Tri-State framework to the English/Language Arts program. Wappingers courageously undertook this work understanding that they serve as the pilot for the application of the Tri-State assessment model for larger, "emerging" districts. The Visit Team was pleased and proud to serve the district in its laudable and dedicated work.

Acting as "critical friends," team members spent three days carefully reviewing and considering information compiled and presented by Wappingers staff with respect to the 15 Tri-State indicators. The 23-member Tri-State visit team included elementary, middle school and high school ELA teachers, language arts specialists, and school and central office administrators from member districts in Connecticut and New York. Working as indicator teams, they studied reports, documents and evidence of student performance provided by the Wappingers administration and faculty. Displays of student work, which included an impressive exhibition of visual art work linked to the language arts program, were appreciated by and helpful to the visit team. Team members were welcomed warmly as they visited each of the district schools and interviewed administration, faculty, students and parents. Several members also spent time shadowing junior high school and high school students during English/Language Arts classes. Visit Team members and representatives from the Wappingers Tri-State steering committee participated in a consultancy protocol focusing on the questions identified by Wappingers as essential to its ELA continuous improvement plan.

Using qualitative and quantitative data gathered from a variety of sources, the team members assessed the district's current status relative to each indicator, and crafted related commendations and recommendations. In addition, as a means of offering a holistic response to Wappingers' goal of "continuous progress on the pathway of excellence,"

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team members developed reflections and recommendations with respect to overarching goals and essential questions of the ELA program.

Specifically, the team used the district's essential questions as a lens to examine evidence and reflect upon the extent to which alignment with NYS standards is informing curriculum and driving instruction, and the degree to which the K-12 English Language Arts program is fostering instructional strategies to develop critical thinking skills for all learners.

Throughout the three-day visit, the administration, staff, students and parents were hospitable, gracious and most helpful. Having spent significant time talking with and listening to the staff and observing students as they participated in and reflected on learning, the team was left with the very strong impression that the administration and teachers are dedicated, motivated, hard-working professionals who care deeply about their students. A commitment to collaboration and continuous improvement practices was evident and united all constituent groups. Everyone we met was proud of Wappingers Central School District and shared their belief in the district's potential to attain and sustain high levels of student performance related to rigorous and authentic learning for all. Our interviews with parents helped us understand the strong support they provide the schools and the interest they have in helping the administration and teachers to ensure a high quality, equitable education to all students in the Wappingers Central School District.

It was also clear that Wappingers has identified the challenges that need to be creatively met by all members of the greater community as well as the school community. The use of a strategic planning framework and process, such as that presented by the Tri-State model, is means of further identifying, prioritizing and operationalizing specific goals and objectives and their relationship to the overarching aim of continuously improving student learning. The members of the visit team commend the district for being willing to invite examination and critique as a basis for achieving the lofty and worthy aspirations detailed in master planning, goal setting and priority initiative documents.

ASSESSMENT OF THE DISTRICT CLIMATE

It is the team's conclusion that an overarching vision for improving student performance in K-12 English/Language Arts needs to be collaboratively developed, communicated and put into place over the next several years. There are many initiatives underway and others are being considered. It is important to select a few of these initiatives—those most clearly associated with short term goals—and sustain work on them so that they are implemented throughout the district and have their intended impact on improving student performance. The Thinking Map initiative is an example of the first steps in the successful implementation of a strategy to improve teaching and learning. The visit team saw evidence of the beginnings of a systems approach to making these changes, but the size and complexity of the district and the turnover in leadership in recent years make this job

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difficult. Bringing stability to those leadership positions most responsible for student learning and professional development—specifically in ELA—is a recurring theme that is included in this report as a priority recommendation. Administration, faculty, parents and students have pride in their schools and in the district and share a great desire and dedication to work collaboratively as members of a “learning community.” These essential ingredients create an environment that is friendly and ripe for improvement efforts. Securing resources to lead and sustain this work and applying a “backwards planning” approach, i.e., defining desired outcomes in terms of results and then committing to those approaches and implementation practices best suited to achieving these outcomes, are challenges this district seems prepared to address.

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Wappingers’ goals for student performance in English/Language Arts are focused on improving reading and writing using state tests as the primary source of data in grades 3-12. Assessment of student reading in the primary grades is systematically addressed through the comprehensive literacy program. Some evidence exists that the balanced literacy approach being introduced at the elementary level leads to improved performance in reading; however, overall, there is a concern on the part of Wappingers educators and parents that student performance in reading and writing, at least as measured by those assessments administered and reported on a district-wide basis, is flat.

In reflecting on how Wappingers might begin to move *each* student ahead with respect to understanding and skills on a steady basis over the course of the school year, the visit team calls to the attention of the district the distinction between assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. While state and national tests offer a snapshot of student performance with respect to standards at one point in time during the year, they do not serve to inform instruction in ways that allow for ongoing improvement of learning in a differentiated way. They also do not adequately allow students to demonstrate growth in the critical thinking goals that are part of the district’s ELA mission.

To both better inform and differentiate instruction and to allow for the community to monitor and celebrate progress using multiple indicators, the Tri-State visit team recommends that the administration and teachers collaboratively consider the development of a small number of long-term, measurable goals for student performance in viewing, listening, reading and writing that include, but are not limited to, the types of student performance assessed by the state tests. Examples of student performance that go beyond the state tests include process writing, reading texts used in courses, and research projects. Critical thinking skills can be systematically embedded in each of these areas of student performance. Additional sources of data can include assured process writing tasks embedded in the curriculum, reading comprehension of texts in classroom settings, a systematic use of writing portfolios that show the links between student self-reflection and goal setting and improvements in writing, and research projects systematically embedded in the curricula throughout the grades. Thinking Maps are one way to embed critical

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thinking skills in the planning processes of writing, as a tool to comprehend information in non-fiction texts, and throughout the steps of research projects.

The visit team recommends that Wappingers select one or two areas of student performance in literacy and carefully move towards a systematic, systemic and sustained effort to improve student performance K-12. It is essential that this work be carefully planned so that it does not exceed the capacity of the district to implement and sustain change. Future budgets can link the request for funds to the intended impact on measurable student performance. Follow-up reports could begin to show the actual impact of funding on student performance.

This work is difficult and includes many steps that must be supported by professional development, including job-embedded modeling and coaching, collaboration among teachers and administrators, and time. Technology will help make the work more productive and can be used to address the need for improved consistency through regular communication. Once long-term, measurable goals are developed, some of the tasks related to successful implementation and goal attainment include the development of yearly, measurable and “doable” goals for student performance at grade, course and school levels, action plans to accomplish the school goals, and professional development designed to provide administrators and teachers with the tools and skills to carry out their action plans. Examples of such tools and skills include: design of performance assessments embedded in the curricula K-12, development and use of common rubrics, skills in coaching students to self-assess and set goals for improvement, skills in collaboratively studying and scoring student work, and skills in using the data and information about best teaching practices to differentiate instruction to improve the performance of all students.

As noted above, the analysis and evaluation of student performance should include a focus on the improvement of individual students’ learning as they move through the grades. This work will require that administrators and teachers become a community of learners in partnership with students and parents to marshal energy, time and resources. The supervision and evaluation process can focus on a supportive, collaborative interaction of administrators and teachers to improve leadership, teaching and learning. An example of one such approach, discussed during the consultancy is the use of “learning walks,” wherein teams of administrators and/or teachers visit a series of classrooms and then analyze what they observed across the visit through the lens of an essential question.

Establishing leadership and professional development structures and systems that promote coherence and consistency around the core technologies of teaching and learning is an essential first step. The use of the Tri-State framework as a tool for defining core elements and indicators of best practice relative to a learning community is clearly a strategy the district has embraced and begun to implement. Continuing to focus on English/Language Arts is recommended both because the momentum of early work is beginning to result in improvements in student learning in an area that underlies learning across subject areas and because, done well, it can serve as a model for study and improvement in other disciplines.

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Tri-State work targets systemic improvements in students' deep understanding and ability to apply skills in rigorous and authentic contexts; as such it requires focused and sustained expertise not only with respect to content but also in regard to the strategic improvement process. The visit team agreed that, given the district's aspirations, size, and master planning goals, expert and stable leadership is a critical element. In light of this need, the position of assistant superintendent could be made more attractive and potentially most effective if responsibilities were focused on curriculum, instruction and assessment and if salary was competitive with districts recruiting for such expert leadership. The team was encouraged to see that the proposed district budget recognized that similar needs exist in the area of ELA and are being addressed by adding an elementary ELA leadership position and the phasing in of additional literacy specialists.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION 1

We have made strong efforts, K-12, to align our ELA program with the expectations of the NYS Standards. To what extent is our alignment informing curriculum and driving instruction?

The team observed clear evidence in the documents provided that the district ELA curriculum is aligned with NYS standards. Effective last spring, grade K-5 report cards were redesigned to be standards-based and are linked to the curricula for those grade levels. Perceptions of alignment have not yet caught up with this change; expanded communication with parents and connections with educators at transition grades would help close this gap. Shared assessments and performance expectations with teacher-created anchor sets, aligned to rigorous benchmarks of performance (including but not limited to state standards) would bring more alignment among the written, taught and assessed curricula.

Variability in how the written curriculum is interpreted, implemented and assessed across classrooms, schools and especially at transition points, is a factor that impacts overall improvement gains. Coherence and consistency were viewed by all as necessary conditions to bring focus and increased impact to the tremendous efforts being expended by stakeholders. The next steps can include the articulation of essential questions, reading comprehension, process writing, critical thinking and research skills along a K-12 continuum and within in disciplines at each grade level. Thinking Maps can be a component of each of these strands and provide links among them. This work to refine the use of reading, writing, research and critical thinking skills is one way for Wappingers to define their approach to rigor throughout the grades and across the disciplines. The visit team does not recommend the use of formal curriculum mapping strategies at this time.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION 2

To what extent is the current K-12 ELA program meeting our district goal of fostering instructional strategies to develop critical thinking skills for all learners?

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There was overall agreement among team members that the introduction and implementation of Thinking Maps was the most successful, widespread instructional initiative the district has undertaken in recent years. As a set of tools this system has enjoyed widespread application and there was anecdotal evidence from teachers, students and parents that it has made students feel more confident and capable with respect to problem analysis and planning. Critical thinking strategies, especially those related to reading comprehension and writing, were components of most learning activities observed and documented.

However, with respect to the definition of a critical skills framework or the design, implementation and assessment of a systematic and sustained plan to integrate critical thinking skills into the curriculum (specifically ELA), district staff acknowledge that significant work remains to be done. Educators are committed to this work and excited about the potential it has for improving student performance, particularly with respect to 21st century learning goals.

The visit team suggests that initial steps include the development of a district-wide definition of critical thinking; identification of critical thinking skills to be mastered and used along the K-12 continuum; and integration of these critical thinking skills into curriculum, instruction and performance assessments. Refinement of the use of critical thinking skills and integration of these skills across curricula is a way for Wappingers to define their approach to rigor throughout the grades and across the disciplines. Impressive work is underway regarding Thinking Maps. A clear, common language and set of student-centered learning tools are emerging about critical thinking that can be used as a foundation for the work to define and articulate critical thinking K-12 in English/ Language Arts and all other disciplines.

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The visit team extends its thanks to Richard Powell, Superintendent, Charles Hill, Assistant Superintendent for Technology, Testing and Assessments, Christine Brady, Interim Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction, Tom Stella, Director of Administrative Support, and Margery Wadkins, K-12 English/Language Arts Coordinator, as well as many other district and school administrators and teachers for their thorough preparation for the visit, for their warm welcome as the team arrived, and for their unstinting assistance and support during the visit. The hospitality extended to the team during the visit was superb and gratefully received.