

Appendix II: Wappingers Consultancy (Thursday, April 26, 2007)

Participants:

From the team:

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1. Introduction.

2. Clarifying questions. The following information was conveyed in response to the team's clarifying questions:

- The ELA curriculum is based on NYS standard.
- The taught curriculum is not same as the written curriculum.
- Assessments are aligned with the taught curriculum.
- There is no monitoring for the consistent application of curriculum.
- The district does not yet have a mutually agreed upon definition of what constitutes critical thinking.
- Teachers and principals set goals annually.
- District-wide assessments are in place at all levels.
- Principals collaborate with one another during the school year. Principals collaborate with teachers on a regular basis.
- Non-state assessments are in place.
- The choice of the Thinking Maps approach was related to our critical thinking goal.
- Best practices for differentiating instruction are identified and shared within each school.
- There is a long-term written plan for implementing balanced literacy.

3. Probing questions. The following information was conveyed in response to the team's probing questions:

Is there a plan in place for monitoring the application of an aligned curriculum across the district? *It is easier to do at the high school level. Marjorie Wadkins (MW) is in all high school classrooms on a regular basis. She works closely junior high and high school teachers in a collaborative structure. Teachers are the drivers at the elementary level. Each school has an ELA committee that is headed by the assistant principal and that includes grade-level teachers and reading instructors. We also have in place a district-wide literacy committee.*

Is there sharing of ideas among the elementary schools, junior high schools and the high schools? *MW serves as a conduit. The district literacy committee has representatives from all the elementary schools. It meets every other month.*

Apart from state tests, what assessments are you using in ELA? *DRA's are used in grades K-3 three times a week. There are also informal assessments in the classroom. Reading Records are used at the intermediate level. In the junior high schools we have Writing Response and portfolio assessment with rubrics and benchmark assessments in grades 6-8. We have portfolio assessment in grades 9-12. The portfolios contain examples of students' best writing and reflection. The portfolios are passed on from grade 8 to grade 9 teachers.*

Are you engaged in Looking at Student Work (LASW) and creating anchor sets? *We have a plan by grade level to engage in LASW. We have common assessments and we are developing anchors as benchmarks for teachers. Writing folders preceded the portfolios, which were introduced two years ago. Thinking Maps have helped us to unify our approach to critical thinking.*

Is there an overall assessment of the portfolios? *Yes, we have a year-end portfolio presentation in grades 7-10.*

What instructional strategies do you find most useful in fostering critical thinking? *We place an emphasis on the construction of meaning from earliest levels. We think of it as "management" of children's thinking. We place a high value on children's thinking. Students' talking to each other is treated as really important. Thinking Maps serve as a vehicle for conveying the idea that we value on students' thinking.*

Which specific critical thinking skills are you focusing on? *We don't do it in a hierarchical way. The teaching of critical thinking skills occurs in all classrooms at all grade levels.*

It is clear that teachers appreciate the use of Thinking Maps that it has created a common language across the district. How did you decide to introduce them? *Lloyd Jaeger brought them into the district from his experience with them in a previous assignment. The initial presentation by David Hyerle was favorably received by teachers, who urged that it move forward. It was implemented over two years. We are developing a survey to help us track the results of their use. Hyerle has met with our in-district trainers and administrators. During our first faculty meeting in June 900 people will complete the survey. We used grant money to supplement what the district invested in the training.*

Your second essential question refers to “all learners.” What are your strategies to reach all learners. *The Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop models incorporate opportunities for differentiation. We offer choices in project-based learning at the high school level, especially in grade 9. This allows students to work at their own level. We also offer special projects addressed to gifted students.*

4. Consultancy. The team made the following points during their consultancy conversation:

The district has been working hard over these three years and has made huge decisions. We hope they won’t go too fast; perhaps now is the time to stop and reflect a bit.

It is important that the district embrace the positive results that it has already realized and build on them.

It is critical to agree upon a common language across the district.

Thinking Maps are clear, concrete, cross-disciplinary and they have positive effects for the kids. The district might give thought to developing a continuum of thinking skills, some more complex than others. It would then be possible to align the Thinking Maps with specific thinking skills at different developmental levels. There is a lot of potential here. It would provide great opportunities to create local assessments to supplement those mandated by the state. That, in turn, would enable you to document your story for the public.

Opportunities for celebration are important. The district is experiencing a paradigm shift with the introduction of the workshop models. More work is needed in vertical curriculum mapping that links the elementary, junior high and high school levels. Teachers made it clear how much they value professional development opportunities. They feel they need more. There is grass roots energy in the schools. Elementary teachers have fine practices that they would like to share across buildings. The high school teachers, too, have best practices to share. In rolling out professional development, consider replicating the way the Thinking Maps training was carried out. It would be a good idea to have a more comprehensive professional development plan that would enable you to see how all the pieces fit together.

There is a wonderful level of collegiality in the high schools. High school teachers may be able to help teachers at the lower grade levels.

It is important to select a limited number of goals that are worthy of four or five years worth of work. One important question is how to make use of state testing without being limited by it. Process writing is regarded here as more important than writing to the state test. Continue the use of Thinking Maps as an instructional strategy. Connect input to output by studying the influence of Thinking Maps on student performance.

District-wide consistency is always a concern in a large district. Developing anchor sets will facilitate this process. Portfolios are a perfect vehicle for introducing that consistency while allowing for individual school cultures.

The district's character education efforts have been very effective in changing the culture of the schools we visited.

Professional Learning Communities are valued by teachers and are a powerful professional development opportunity.

We heard about "management by walking around." Learning Walks might be a good practice to introduce both with administrators and teachers participating. They could build on the collegiality that is already there. Principals would receive professional development to become coaches for their teachers.

Consider using formal protocols for LASW. They will help to develop metacognition.

All meeting agendas should be organized around learning.

Looking at common rubrics and anchor sets will broaden the communication across the district. You need to distinguish between checklists and rubrics and develop a common language on the rubrics.

It is critical to break the work up into bite size pieces and then see them through.

5. District response. Participants from the district made the following comments in response to the consultancy:

I am excited about the idea of Learning Walks. It will focus my work as an assistant principal.

I appreciate the advice to "slow down" We have done so much work in the past few years. Introducing comprehensive literacy into ten elementary schools has been a huge task. Our learning communities grew out of this effort.

We are ready to move to the next phase in our character education initiatives.

Thinking Maps have been a maverick motivational piece for us. We actually used Thinking Maps to explain the TSC process to the faculty.

In this large district of ours we need to clarify what anchor sets are and what it looks like when our students are thinking critically.

Learning Walks should be used as a coaching device and kept separate from the evaluation system.

Focusing on consistency and collaboration is excellent advice.

I like the consultancy as a new addition to the visit process. It serves to make the process less impersonal

The Consortium has proved to be a powerful professional development tool for our staff.

Consortium participation “has transformed me.” It has unified our work in ELA.

Our biggest challenge is the day after the team leaves. We need to be evangelists with these *really* good ideas. And we need to observe the reality of our organization as we move forward.

Just as we have been talking about models for coaching our teachers, the Consortium has provided us with a model for coaching the district. It serves to focus us on student output.