



**Tri-State
Consortium**

TRI-STATE CONSORTIUM

Wappingers CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Consultancy

Special Education: January 11-12, 2016

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Tri-State Consortium

District

Superintendent
Assistant Superintendent

Focus

Special Education

Dates of Visit

January 11-12, 2016

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“The mission of the Wappingers Central School District is to empower all of our students with the competencies and confidence to challenge themselves, to pursue their passions, and to realize their potential while growing as responsible members of their community.”

The Wappingers Central School District is a long-standing member of the Tri-State Consortium; since 2005, the Consortium has collaborated with Wappingers’ administrators and teachers to focus on specific program areas of interest to the district.

In our roles as critical friends and colleagues from other member districts in the Consortium, our intent is to look closely at the current best practices, guidelines, and implementation of special education support across the district. Over the course of two days, January 11-12, we facilitated conversations with a wide range of classroom teachers and co-teachers, AIS teachers, reading support teachers, ENL teachers, RTI coordinators, school psychologists, assistant directors, coordinators, Disproportionality and Cultural Competence committee members, principals, assistant principals, and curriculum leaders inquiring about their specific needs, suggestions for change, and the growth that has occurred within the larger program and specific buildings.

The format for these conversations, a Consultancy, is a framework that Consortium districts find most collegial and supportive. By gathering information from documents and interviews with representative stakeholders district-wide, we draw conclusions about next steps for the district based on our collective understanding of the current approach in place, the areas of concern related to consistency of services throughout the district, instructional strategies that are agreed-upon, and the systemic connections across all schools.

Superintendent Jose Carrion welcomed the Tri-State team on the first day; Michelle Cardwell, Asst. Supt. Curriculum and Instruction, Daren Lolkema, Asst. Supt., Compliance and Information

Systems, and Richard Zipp, Executive Director of Special Education, joined him. In their opening remarks, this team shared their sense that the district Special Education program is moving in a positive direction. Copies of the internally developed “WCSD Integrated Co-Teaching Handbook,” the NYS 2013-14 Special Education District Data Profile, and a recent draft of the district’s Response to Intervention (RTI) framework were available to each of us; these documents represent the district’s focus on designing systems that support student success.

We were interested to learn that the Co-Teaching Task Force created the Handbook, that is unique to Wappingers CSD, with the guiding principle that the co-teaching model is a “...collaborative process with shared, responsibility, planning, and philosophy...” a unifying statement that sets the Handbook’s positive tone. In addition to the specific factors that provide the optimal support for students and teachers in co-taught classrooms, there are Instructional Resources, sample lesson plans, differentiated models, and strategies that define the expectations of the co-taught classroom model. The data profile represents a NY State mandate under the IDEA regulations and aligns to indicators/standards for student performance.

Currently, Wappingers CSD serves over 11,000 students in 10 Elementary, 2 Middle, and 3 High Schools, and the main concerns involve the inconsistency of services and programs across all buildings, as well as the appropriateness of the services being offered. While the scope of the student enrollment, the number of Special Educators assigned to buildings, and the breakdown of 15% of the total enrollment identified as classified are points of data that can describe the basic elements in the district, this Consultancy centered on the distribution of services, the ongoing commitment to the Least Restrictive Environment for classified students, and the need to analyze the available data to ensure that students are moving forward, growing while in the program and exiting with consistent strategies to learn independently.

The district is currently piloting two Universal Screeners, Star and i-Ready, and the plan is to select one that will most effectively provide pre-referral data. Our interviews with staff

repeatedly referred to the current pilot of these two programs in place, and there is a sense that staff anticipates the selection of the screener that is the best fit for the district. During our interviews with staff, we heard consistent support for a system that can be predictive for students as they move through the Wappingers' system.

Our inquiry is a precursor to a longer, more in-depth visit planned for 2016-17, and is designed to assist the district in preparing for that visit. This two-day consultancy is directly linked to a set of Essential Questions developed by the district's internal Steering Committee. Although the Essential Questions are designed to guide our thinking as we interview, examine evidence, and debrief together, the scope of information provided was quite extensive; we concluded that organizing our information under these five broad topics would provide clarity and specific recommendations: RTI, Professional Learning, Services, Communication, Leadership.

1. Response to Intervention

Issues to Address

- Clarity of purpose and process should be revisited to assure that students are classified because of their academic deficiencies rather than behavioral issues, and that appropriate settings and interventions are in place for students exhibiting behavioral concerns. An important question for the district to consider is: To what extent is this the case?
- Although in broad terms the criteria for services are common throughout the district, each school establishes its own set of specific criteria and makes its own exceptions when deemed necessary. It would be helpful to examine the process and criteria that building principals have in place to ensure that similar services are requested using common, agreed upon criteria. In defining "common, agreed upon criteria," a key question focuses on the differences between standardization, consistency and autonomy, and which option will serve the district's students best?

- The district has been cited by NYS for disproportionality. In our discussions with staff members, it is their impression that students of color and lower socio-economic status experience higher rates of classification and are placed into the district's higher level (honors and Advanced Placement) courses at lower rates. We recommend addressing this question by analyzing data and the selection process to determine the extent of the concern and to develop a set of solutions for it. Teacher practice and strategies that center on individual student needs can be the source of rich data gathered through formative assessments, conferencing, and reflection.
- The RTI efforts at the junior high schools and high schools are not yet well developed, and in the elementary schools the Tier III RTI remedies seem to be more intense applications of Tier II interventions (e.g., AIS 5 days out of 6 rather than 3 days out of 6). RTI programs that are ambiguous lead inevitably to more referrals for classification. Greater attention to the development of more differentiated Tier III strategies would be helpful.
- Among the staff, there is a sense that the district may be overclassifying students, a practice that is beginning to become more evident. The new Executive Director has been meeting with Wappingers staff to review data and determine what the data are saying about particular students. The visit team concluded that the Executive Director's approach to working with staff to analyze data more effectively is appreciated by them and has had some impact on their thinking about classification.
- Progress monitoring is a critical component of an effective RTI model. There must be a process in place that will inform the district about how students are progressing. We recommend that the district consider analyzing the current progress monitoring that is occurring in the district, and the creation of a clear and consistent progress monitoring process.

2. Professional Learning

- In many districts, general education staff members often view the education of special education students (and remedial education students, as well) as under the purview of different staff members – special education teachers, reading/AIS teachers, for example. To some degree, this appears to be the case in Wappingers. We recommend that the district provide Professional Learning that is embedded in the whole system so that the general education teachers will recognize that they are responsible for **all** students they teach and have the knowledge and skills to do this work effectively.
- We question the Professional Learning opportunities available to special education teachers, particularly those newly hired by the district. We suggest the district would benefit from pausing to look closely at the range of opportunities available for the Special Education staff. For example, teachers described a lack of clarity about differentiated instruction methodologies and indicated that models of effective methods would offer support in real time with colleagues.
- Models of specific professional learning --- Superintendent's ADMIN ACADEMY, for example --- have been successful. As the district moves forward with the design of professional learning opportunities, we suggest that the talented district staff can establish an embedded schedule of courses housed within buildings or the District Office.
- Concerns related to the Integrated Co-Teaching teams were consistent in our interviews; the compatibility of the co-teachers, their understanding and implementation of the co-teaching model, and the amount of time they have to do collaborative planning. These are significant issues that can be addressed through targeted Professional Learning opportunities.
- Another matter that can be addressed through a more structured Professional Learning process is cultural sensitivity. Several staff members raised this as an important issue, indicating that the lack of cultural sensitivity may be interfering with the classification, intervention and placement processes.

3. Special Education Services

- There are 43 teachers who have completed training in the Wilson Reading System. Consider clarifying the district commitment to the Wilson methodology, and decide whether an inservice experience coordinated by this group would benefit staff. Those teachers who identified themselves as trained suggested that fidelity to the Wilson system is inconsistent, at best.
- There are special education reading teachers based in seven of the ten elementary buildings; the Elementary Coordinator facilitates their monthly meetings. However, it appears that all reading teachers have an individual building-based delivery model and programs can include Reading Recovery, Just Words, Leveled Literacy Intervention, Double Dose Foundations, Wilson system. While Foundations is the identified primary developmental reading program across the district, teachers in one building are piloting Journeys. The team was curious about this pilot because it suggests that the consistent Foundations program might become optional.
- The recently developed draft of the Co-Teaching Handbook was presented to all administrators, as a model of what co-teaching should look like in the classroom. The co-teaching task force is positive, working collaboratively. The district is committed to the co-teaching model, and the co-teachers describe growth in student learning directly linked to the common preparation time; some expressed concerns about ongoing resources.
- The visit team recommends that the district look closely at the current services for 11th and 12th grade students. A revision of the current model, moving from a continuation of the co-teaching model, might be replaced by services that are more closely related to post-secondary school expectations.
- The issue of student mental health services is complicated and we understand that outplacement affects the budget. Although this is an idea to consider in the future, members of the Tri-State team have established therapeutic “schools within a school” in their districts that are successful. Students who can stay in the district, allowed, when

appropriate, to move into the general education classroom for specific courses, have made great strides.

- Concerns about consistency/standardization/autonomy arose around the provision of services in the 15 schools. We suggest that the district explore this, focusing on issues such as specific programs offered, test modifications, staffing and frequency of services (i.e., how many times per week).

4. Communication

- We suggest that it would be helpful for someone (the superintendent? his cabinet members?) to narrate the district's concerns about special education/general education for the staff and to discuss with them the district's thinking about how to address the concerns. Having one clear voice expressing one clear message will eliminate confusion and uncertainty. There is a story to unfold, one that will be distinguished by data analysis, a universal screening program, specific frameworks for selected assessments, consistent instructional strategies, and systemic flexibility in a classified student's journey that moves toward independence.
- The Consortium informed the WCSD administration that meeting with district parents of classified students would not be a part of the precursor visit but would be a part of the longer more in-depth visit planned for the 2016-2017 school year. Educating the parent community of classified students is a critical piece of the move toward more transparency within and across buildings. Creating opportunities to share student successes with parents, and educating the parent community about district resources that are well-researched and compatible with systems in place builds understanding and increases capacity of community support. Doing this will also help parents understand the concerns that exist, and may generate support for the budget if some of the proposed remedies involve the expenditure of funds.

5. Leadership

- All WCSD administrators need to be partners in this process. Change can only be possible and occur when building leaders are supportive to the overall goal of the District. As the narrative unfolds, it is pivotal that building leaders play a major role in sharing the story with their faculties, gathering information from their faculties, and working with their faculties to resolve issues. This can be a challenging issue for the district office leaders because building leaders often seek to protect the autonomy of their buildings' teachers and the unique cultures of their buildings, which is as it should be. Thus, for the district office leadership team, the challenge is engaging 15 building leaders in finding common ground and defining those practices that should be standardized, those that must be consistent, and those that can remain autonomous.
- Related to the above suggestion is the question of mindset. Research is clear that a teacher's lack of belief in the ability of students to learn results in less learning. Building leaders know the mindset of the people with whom they work each day, they can intervene with those who don't always believe in their students' abilities, and inspire those who do.
- District and building leadership teams typically focus on professional development for their faculties, but far less often think about their own professional learning needs. We suggest that the district examine a set of professional learning experiences around special education/general education that will enable the district's leaders to continue to grow individually and as a team.
- Another matter we suggest the district examine is deployment of staff. In a tax cap environment (especially in a year when it will be .012%), examining the current deployment of teachers and assistants may provide ways for the district to meet the needs of its students more effectively. It might also be helpful to re-examine the role of the assistant directors, who we perceive as competent but perhaps slightly under-utilized. And, the provision of AIS for at-need students is critical – are the right teachers

assigned to this task, and are they being properly supported by the district with appropriate training?

- In a district with 10 elementary schools, we suggest it would be useful for the principals to have regularly scheduled meetings, either with the assistant superintendent for instruction or the superintendent, to discuss matters of relevance and to synchronize themselves as issues arise.
- The final leadership issue to be considered is accountability. If the system is serious about identifying programs, process and practices that will be implemented in a standardized and/or consistent manner, how will it ensure that this is occurring?

Finally, our two days in Wappingers were full; our conversations with administrators and teachers were open and collegial. The team deeply appreciated the opportunity to discuss practice, concerns, solutions, and some wonderings about what next steps will occur. Dedicated, highly professional, and reflective, the entire Wappingers staff were welcoming and eager to help us understand the complexities of the system. Our special thanks for your hospitality and kind attention to our creature comforts!