



**Tri-State  
Consortium**

**Wappingers Central School District**  
**TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2017**  
Special Education K-12, January 11-13, 2017

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## Tri-State Consortium

### Wappingers Central School District

### TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2017

Special Education K-12, January 11-13, 2017

<p><b>Vicki Graboski, Co-Leader</b> Teacher, SPED Bedford Fox Lane High School Route 172, Bedford, NY 10506 914-241-6000 Ext: 6521 vgraboski0449@bcsdny.org</p>	<p><b>Ari Rothman, Co-Leader</b> Assistant Principal New Canaan New Canaan High School 11 Farm Road, New Canaan, CT 06840 203-594-4683 ari.rothman@ncpsk-12.org</p>
<p><b>Adam VanDerStuyf, Co-Leader</b> Director, PPS North Salem North Salem Central School District 230 June Road, North Salem, NY 10560 914-669-5414 Ext. 1016 avanderstuyf@northsalemschools.org</p>	<p><b>Kristina Schlote</b> Director, Special Education Rye Neck Public Schools 310 Hornridge Road Mamaroneck, NY 10543 914-777-5200 kscholte@ryeneck.org</p>
<p><b>Maureen Brown Warren</b> Speech/Language Specialist Bedford Mount Kisco Elementary School 47 West Hyatt Avenue, Mount Kisco, NY 10549 914-241-6000 Ext: 5675 mbrownwarren0117@bcsdny.org</p>	<p><b>Joyce Long</b> Director, PPS Brewster Brewster Central School District 50 Foggintown Road, Brewster, NY 10509 845-278-8570 jlong@brewsterschools.org</p>

<p><b>Kerri Bianchi</b>  Assistant Principal  Croton-Harmon  Carrie E. Tompkins  8 Gerstein St., Croton-on- Hudson, NY  10520  914 271 5184  kerri.bianchi@chufsd.org</p>	<p><b>Karen Gatto</b>  Director, SPED  Croton-Harmon  Croton-Harmon School District  10 Gerstein Street, Croton-on-Hudson, NY  10520  914-271-6675  karen.gatto@chufsd.org</p>
<p><b>Noreen Urso</b>  Asst. Supt., PPS  Eastchester  Eastchester Union Free School District  580 White Plains Road, Eastchester, NY  10709  914-793-6130 Ext. 4239  nurso@eastchester.k12.ny.us</p>	<p><b>Laura Sullivan</b>  Director, SPED  Hastings  Hastings-on-Hudson Union Free School District  27 Farragut Avenue  Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706  914-478-6265  sullivanl@hohschools.org</p>
<p><b>Tatiana Memoli</b>  Director, SPED  Port Chester  Port Chester Public Schools  113 Bowman Avenue, Rye Brook, NY 10573  914-934-7925  tremoli@pcschools.lhric.org</p>	<p><b>Eileen Cagner</b>  Dept. Chair, SPED  Scarsdale  Scarsdale High School  1057 Post Road, Scarsdale, NY 10583  914-721-2457  ecagner@scarsdaleschools.org</p>
<p><b>Karin Coons</b>  High school Resource Teacher  Bronxville Public Schools  177 Pondfield Road  Bronxville, NY 1070008  914-395-0500  kcoons@bronxvilleschool.org</p>	<p><b>Eric Rauschenbach</b>  Director, SPED  Scarsdale  Scarsdale Public Schools  2 Brewster Road, Scarsdale, NY 10583  914-721-2400  erauschenbach@scarsdaleschools.org</p>
<p><b>Pauline Smith</b>  Director, PPS  Trumbull  Trumbull Public Schools  6254 Main Street, Trumbull, CT 06611  203-452-4352  smithp@trumbullps.org</p>	

**TRI-STATE LIAISONS:**

**Kathleen Reilly**

Director of Training

Tri-State Consortium

203-762-2004

kathleenreillyct@gmail.com

**Martin G. Brooks**

Executive Director

Tri-State Consortium

631-478-9954

mgbrooks@optonline.net

**“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.”**

## **Executive Summary**

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The Wappingers Central School District (WCSD) invited a team of critical friends from the Tri-State Consortium, a learning organization comprised of 47 school districts in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, to examine the district’s use of the integrated co-teaching (ICT) model in providing Special Education services for students with disabilities. The Wappingers Central School District is a longstanding and valued member of the Tri State Consortium (2000), and our mission statement describes, **“...a dynamic learning organization devoted to assisting its member districts in using student performance data to develop a rigorous framework for systemic planning, assessment, and continuous improvement.”** As the Consortium moves through its third decade, our core beliefs remain focused on authentic and interdisciplinary teaching and learning and purposeful assessment practices that are directly linked to optimal student performance.

The Tri-State Consortium visit team consisted of special education teachers, special education directors, assistant superintendents, and school administrators from several member districts. The team spent three days in the WCSD, January 11 through January 13, 2017. During those three days the team examined documentary evidence prepared by the district, and conducted interviews with faculty, staff, parents, students and Board of Education members.

Prior to our arrival, the district’s Tri-State Steering committee collaborated to develop the following Essential Questions for the team to consider:

- 1. To what extent are the initial referral process and practices consistent across the district where the recommended program service is ICT?**
- 2. To what extent is the current process for recommending ICT by subject area understood, consistent and monitored at the High School level?**
- 3. To what extent is the education of special education students viewed as a shared responsibility across all buildings?**

## Findings and Impressions

Superintendent of Schools, Jose Carrion, and members of the leadership team, welcomed the Tri-State team on the first day of the visit and were available to answer questions and clarify evidence during our entire time in the district. Following up on a shorter Tri-State visit during the 2015-2016 school year, WCSD asked the visiting team members to consider the three essential questions, which are answered separately and inclusively within this report, along with providing additional questions and thoughts for WCSD to consider.

It is important to note that (1) our overall impression of WCSD's ICT approach is quite positive especially considering the changes in leadership over the past few years, and (2) every student with whom the visiting team met spoke very highly of their experiences within the ICT model. The responses to these questions follow, and they are meant to assist the Wappingers Central School District as it moves forward with the ICT model.

### Essential Question #1:

***To what extent are the initial referral process and practices consistent across the district where the recommended program service is ICT?***

Over the past number of years, there has been much turnover of special education administrators, and this has caused great inconsistency in practice and program implementation. The current assistant directors are well regarded and appear to function well as a team. As a result, initial referral processes and practices are more firmly in place across the WCSD than when we visited the district last year, with the highest level of common understanding and fidelity occurring at the elementary school level.

For the most part, the process is driven by the Response To Intervention model, grades K-12. Although the RTI process is considered lengthy and labor intensive by some, the result is that students receive required and needed services and are monitored, and decisions are made regarding placement in Tier II and III services and programs. The agreed upon differences between Tier II and Tier III support are frequency of service and group size. All ten elementary schools understand these criteria. However, it is quite challenging to implement them consistently across all ten schools because of differences in school size, programs and staffing. This means that it is possible for students with similar profiles in different schools to have different RTI experiences leading up to the decision about whether or not to refer them to the Committee on Special Education. Thus, the common criteria, and the common understanding of them, do not necessarily lead to consistency of implementation as students move through the Tiers in different schools.

While providing RTI support, regardless of frequency or group size, the monitoring process appears to consistently include three to four, ten-week cycles of specific interventions. At the conclusion of those cycles, if the interventions have been successful, the RTI team will recommend a continuation of interventions. Otherwise, the data are given to an Assistant Director of Special Education for further review. At this point the process becomes less consistent. Once a student's progress monitoring records are reviewed by an Assistant Director, recommendations are often made for additional RTI services, rather than referral to CSE. The process, clarity, and consistency of these decisions is uneven and the visit team suggests the district review and refine the current approach to ensure deeper understanding by the building level administration and staff.

When a student is referred to the CSE and becomes classified, further inconsistencies may result. For example, students are often placed in part or full time ICT programs, depending on the availability of the program in a given school, rather than in programs that most accurately reflect their needs. Therefore, even when consistency in the referral process occurs, students with similar profiles may be placed in very different programs depending on what is currently available in a particular school building. In addition, at times, CSE services may be less intensive than the RTI services that the student had been receiving (for example, we saw instances of Tier III students receiving more intensive services than students in a resource room setting). As a result, some staff expressed reluctance to refer a student to CSE in order to avoid a decrease in services. To further complicate the process, recommendations may be made for students to transfer to another building within the school district in order to access special education services that are not available in the home school of record. Parents are often reluctant to have their child transferred from their home school, and might refuse the recommended special education services, or they may insist that all children in their family attend the alternate school. These logistical issues cause significant challenges for the district as well as for students and families, and result in highly variable practices.

Through discussions with staff, it became evident that placing students with significant behavioral needs in the Integrated Co-Teach classrooms sets the students and the classes up for many challenges. Thus, we think it could be helpful for the WCSD administrative team to consider where else on the continuum of services students with behavioral needs can be supported: e.g., perhaps in a general education setting with a strong BIP, aide, and/or Psychological/BCBA support?

Students at all levels expressed appreciation for the ICT model. They recognize the variance in instructional teams. For example, some teams consist of teachers who are enthusiastic about



this work and wish to collaborate, and other teams are comprised of teachers who are less enthusiastic and/or do not function as effectively.

We commend the district for hiring certified Teacher Assistants across the schools rather than teacher aides.

**Recommendations for consideration:**

- There is a need for systematic (K-12) discussion on length of time/frequency for collection of RTI data in order to ensure consistent support for students.
- The WCSD leadership team should evaluate the current deployment of staff in terms of RTI needs and consider whether they have the necessary resources to consistently implement RTI strategies across the district.
- Special education teachers and teacher assistants are pulled from their daily work of providing support services to substitute for classroom teachers. This results in fragmented services for students. Adding a sufficient number of substitutes will help preserve the integrity of Tier II and III services.
- We recommend that the district evaluate the current configuration and placement of ICT programs across the district as compared to student need. For example, the creation of a 1-year Algebra ICT option would be beneficial to some higher performing students. We also suggest that the district align programs with student need so that transferring students to other buildings in order to access services will occur on a very limited basis, or ideally, not at all. Student need should drive recommendations, not availability of program.
- We think it could be helpful for the district to examine the continuum of special education services to include a variety of models. For example, our team thought of two possibilities for consideration:

**Option 1**

- Resource Room
- Full Time ICT
- FLEX
- Self-Contained

**Option 2**

- Resource Room
- Part Time ICT for K-2 (with additional support)
- Full Time ICT for grades 3-6
- Self-Contained

- In considering students' placements, we think it could help to develop and share a common understanding of the profile of an ICT student, whether part-time or full-time, so that appropriate and consistent programming decisions can be made for each student.
- Not all staff and administrators define least restrictive environment in a common way. Thus we suggest the district develop and share a common understanding of the term Least Restrictive Environment so that appropriate and consistent programming decisions can be made for each student.
- To reiterate, we think it will be important for the district to plan for and implement a continuum of services for students with primarily behavioral deficits so behavioral issues do not impact the support intended for academically challenged students.
- Consistency of process is, to a large degree, dependent on consistency of leadership. We urge the district to engage the building principals in discussions about the above suggestions, and we also suggest that the district engage the Assistant Directors in these discussions.
- It is challenging for the assistant directors to be consistent in their approaches to placement of students because their decisions are driven largely by the options available. It could be helpful for the Assistant Directors to work collaboratively with the district's special education leaders to norm themselves, as a group, on the continuum of services, processes and placement options. Revisiting the previously developed profile of ICT students might be a good place to start this review.
- We suggest that the district consider how to generate greater independence for learning and student skills as students progress through the high school. The gradual release of more responsibility to students, through a decrease of support, would be helpful to prepare students who are near the end of high school for their future endeavors, whether it is college or career.
- We also wonder whether it makes sense for the district to consider moving special educators from non-Regents ICT classes and consider creating an AIS study skills class, similar to a resource room, without the restriction of being limited to 5 students, for additional support. This also may free up FTEs that can be moved to lower grade levels to provide additional support.

**Essential Question #2:**

***To what extent is the current process for recommending ICT by subject area understood, consistent and monitored at the High School level?***

In discussions with a variety of stakeholders -- students, teachers, instructional leaders, administrators, school counselors -- there is, for the most part, a common understanding of and comfort with the process through which students receiving Special Education services are recommended for an ICT class through the Annual Review PPT. Staff members spoke of this as an inclusive process that sincerely addressed the individual needs of each student, and is becoming more consistent as a result of the two high schools' improving communication. Continued development of and training in the use of appropriate indicators/data, particularly for recommending teachers, would support the interventions and structures that have been put in place. At the high school level, this is especially vital as students move through 11th and 12th grades and the ability of co-teaching teams (not only the Special Education teacher) to provide instruction in appropriate compensatory skills within the content area classroom will better prepare these students for life after graduation.

The process for recommending ICT for a student and monitoring the 'effectiveness' of this type of classroom structure for that student is difficult when there are variations in how an ICT classroom operates. The availability of teachers experienced in the co-teaching model, inequity of opportunities and services across schools and levels, and limitations on alternative structures for meeting specific IEP goals are contributing factors. Students spoke of the variability of their experiences in ICT classes, citing the level to which the two teachers share classroom time, direct engagement with students needing extra attention (those with IEPs) and overall rigor of instruction and teacher expectation. One ICT class stood out in their eyes as ideal, even to the point where it was not clear to any of those interviewed who was the regular education teacher and who was the Special education teacher on this team. They spoke of this class as cognitively engaging as any other in which they'd been enrolled.

Faculty spoke honestly that some teams were experienced working together and sought as much collaborative planning time as possible, while others mentioned that some teachers only found out they were part of an ICT team when learning of their schedule at the beginning of the school year. A few special education teachers working as part of an ICT team confided in us that they sometimes feel like glorified teacher aides. Still, there is palpable enthusiasm among the teachers and a desire to learn how to better serve all their students and plan for it through dedicated common planning time.

Though training opportunities have been made available by the district -- and twenty teams have so far been trained -- there are teams that have not. Moving forward, the district is looking at ways in which such training can be differentiated to address the respective needs of each team and, for this, the WCSD leadership is commended. Training for regular education teachers at the secondary level in order to develop a greater understanding of some common

learning differences of classified students and instructional approaches shown to be effective with these types of learners would benefit both the member of the ICT team and all subject area teachers in the RTI process. The same approach applies to all teachers developing a basic understanding of how to teach and formatively assess core literacy and quantitative skills across disciplines. In a district this size, there are many Special Education and/or AIS teachers with the experience and demonstrated skill to offer their colleagues direction through the very popular EdCamp model. There is much in-district expertise, and we urge the district to utilize it. This would also serve to break down the 'division of labor' that exists between some ICT partners.

Though gaps in practice remain, the work the WCSD has done to provide classified students with the least restrictive environment is significant. Considering the limitations of any high school's master schedule, as well as the availability and distribution of well-honed ICT teams, these impressive efforts should continue. Resource rooms can serve some students for whom the ICT classroom has been the adopted norm. Continued training and resources (such as a certified Teaching Assistant) to address the needs of students whose classification is mostly for behavioral reasons -- and who might very well benefit from that type of classroom environment -- is a suggestion to consider for the ICT classroom and a means to change the perception that it is a 'magic bullet' for all.

**Additional recommendations that the Wappingers CSD might consider as this admirable work continues:**

- All high school stakeholders should develop a shared vision of and training in best-practices in co-teaching; this would provide a basis for assessing consistency, monitoring effectiveness, et al (revisit WCSD Integrated Co-Teaching Handbook, for instance)
- All stakeholders (counselors, psychologists, etc.) should have access to and be trained in how to interpret screening data, as well as implement RTI supports and monitor progress.
- Provide RTI training for general education teachers, counselors, et al, and how to implement and monitor effectiveness of behavioral interventions at the classroom level.
- Consider whether RTI Level II supports (e.g., English Skills, Lit Lab) can be made available for classified students if needed.
- Develop/adopt a district-wide instrument to monitor progress and evaluate the effectiveness of the ICT model (e.g., iReady components/modules may be able to do

this, instead of a separate product/system) -- and also consider using informal administrative observations, feedback.

- Continue to recommend/place students only in the ICT classes within the disciplines where their IEP goals can be appropriately addressed.
- Consider utilizing the EdCamp days for effective teams to offer their colleagues the approaches that have been effective in their ICT classrooms.
- In order to provide the best possible services for special education students, it may make sense for the high schools (and middle schools, as well) to consider scheduling them first each year.
- We suggest that the district consider ways to engage student voice in analyzing its special education services, particularly ICT. The students with whom we met know a lot and have ideas about ways their services might be enhanced. We also wish to mention several groups of students, that may overlap, whose needs may get overlooked, as they do in many districts: quiet students, transient students, lower-functioning general education students, and students who receive little support from their homes.

**Essential Question #3:**

***To what extent is the education of special education students viewed as a shared responsibility across all buildings?***

The question of shared responsibility of the education for all students by all staff district-wide resonated with the Tri-State team because we all share a common response that every student is our responsibility regardless of our teaching assignments. The welcoming presentation in the Board Room by Superintendent Carrion and his leadership team clearly articulated this, with Superintendent Carrion using a house as the metaphor for the interconnected structures and supports the district strives to put in place for each and every student.

At the central office level, there is the beginning of a vision for the integration of the ICT model as outlined in the research-based literature referenced in the opening overview presented to the team. Using the words...empower, challenge, grow...Superintendent Carrion described the commitment to the tenets of best practices. Central office administrators view the vision as applicable for all students and do not differentiate between students with disabilities and without.

The vision has been developed at the central office level and established as a priority. The district has the ability to look at each student at the individualized data level. At the central office level, it appears that the education of special education students is viewed as a shared responsibility among all professionals.

At the building level, all administrators describe a commitment to the ICT model, theoretically, and understand and perceive it as the least restrictive environment for the eligible special education population. However, the team suggests that the ideal model of ICT is compromised by issues that depart from the model, particularly in the process of student placement. The tension arises with the inconsistent adherence to and application of described criteria that results, occasionally, in identified behaviorally challenged students placed in ICT classrooms. Although the number of behaviorally challenged students placed in ICT classrooms may be relatively small compared to the entire ICT population, their impact is large. The ensuing disruption modeled by students with behavioral issues works against the delicate balance that is essential in the ICT environment. The team is aware of this practice across the district, and it became very clear that placing these students within a co-taught classroom is counterproductive. Allowing students who are behaviorally challenged into an atmosphere that is designed as extended support and awareness of students needs raises the question of fidelity to the ICT model.

It appears that the preponderance of teachers across the district view the education of special education students as a shared responsibility. The team suggests the district create and define clear expectations of the ICT model, and provide professional development to support the teachers in the implementation. There appears to be a practice in some buildings of rotating ICT partners from year to year. The team suggests reviewing and refining this practice. In regard to responding to student behavior, it was clear to the team that developing and implementing a student's functional behavior plan and collecting the associated data is everyone's responsibility.

**Recommendations for consideration:**

- Consider reviewing and refining the criteria for student placement in the ICT.
- Consider/continue to provide ongoing targeted professional develop to support teachers in the ICT model, with minimal disruption to the school day, i.e. summer (for teachers and building administrators)
- Consider/continue to provide common planning time for ICT partners
- Consider designating a professional developer for special education
- Consider designating a point person in each building to support collaboration among the

- ICT partners; identify in-house talent and provide them with an opportunity to be heard
- Consider revisiting the CSE process to ensure student programming matches student needs; based on identified student goals (ensure CSE teams are discussing and identifying student needs and goals prior to recommending program placements)
  - We were told that, to a large degree, special education teachers are assigned by building, not by need. To the extent this is true, we suggest that the district reconsider how special education teachers are deployed, and focus deployment more on students' needs than equity of building assignments.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

During our three-day visit to the Wappingers Central School District, we were consistently impressed by the admirable level of energy and professionalism that the teaching and administrative staffs bring to the district. The lines of communication between them appear to be open and respected. The parent representatives appreciated being part of the process and look forward to more opportunities for their voices to be heard and the lines of communication expanded. The students are supportive of the many opportunities that are provided to them each day via the ICT model and take pride in their schools. When the visiting team finished its evaluation of the Wappingers Central School District, we left with the clear knowledge that its strength is derived from the close connection among the professional staff, parents and students.

We commend the superintendent and his leadership team for their concern about and attention to special education students' needs. The superintendent has set a tone of concern that has permeated the district. Additionally, we would be remiss if we didn't mention the appreciation people at all levels of the district expressed for the work of the new Executive Director, Richard Zipp. His impact has been felt acutely over a short period of time.

We thank the district for its attention to the visiting team members. The hospitality was warm and welcoming; we were very well-fed, and we appreciated all the kindnesses of the Wappingers Central School District community.