



**Tri-State
Consortium**

North Salem Central School District

TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY

District Mission, April 26-28, 2017

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Stephanie Pierson-Ugol, Co-Leader

Assistant Superintendent, Co-leader
Easton-Redding
Easton-Redding Public Schools
654 Morehouse Road, Easton, CT 06612
203-261-2513
spiersonugol@er9.org

Anastasia Clohessy

English Language Arts Teacher
Ardsley
Ardsley Middle School
700 Ashford Ave., Ardsley, NY 10502
914-693-7564 ext. 2548
clohessa@ardsleyschools.org

Jaimie Marcus

English Language Arts Teacher
Ardsley
Ardsley High School
300 Farm Road, Ardsley, NY 10502
914-295-5917
JMarcus@ardsleyschools.org

Tom Scarice, Co-Leader

Superintendent, Co-leader
Madison
Madison Public Schools
10 Campus Drive, Madison, CT 06443
203-245-6323
scaricem@madison.k12.ct.us

Jon Hirsch

Assistant Principal
Ardsley
Ardsley High School
300 Farm Road, Ardsley, NY 10502
914-295-5820
JHirsch@ardsleyschools.org

Marcus Eure

English Language Arts Teacher
Brewster
Brewster High School
50 Foggintown Road, Brewster, NY 10509
845-279-5051
meure@brewsterschools.org

Frank Zamperlin

Principal
Brewster
C.V. Starr Intermediate School
20 Farm-to-Market Road, Brewster, NY 10509
845-279-4018
fzamperlin@brewsterschools.org

Doug Berry

Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum/Instruction
Dobbs Ferry
Dobbs Ferry School District
505 Broadway, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522
914-693-1500 ext. 3059
berryd@dfsd.org

Josh Elder

Assistant Principal
Eastchester
Eastchester Middle School
550 White Plains Road, Eastchester, NY 10709
914-793-6130
JElder@Eastchester.k12.ny.us

Laura Seinfeld

Superintendent
Oyster Bay-East Norwich
Oyster Bay-East Norwich Central School District
1 McCouns Lane, Oyster Bay, NY 11771
516-624-6500
lseinfeld@obenschools.org

Steve Garcia

Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum/Instruction
Pelham
Pelham Public Schools
18 Franklin Place, Pelham, NY 10803
914-738-3434 ext. 5
sgarcia@pelhamschools.org

David Gusitsch

K-12 Health
Westport
Staples High School
70 North Ave, Westport, CT 06880
203-341-2429
dgusitsch@westport.k12.ct.us

TRI-STATE LIAISONS:**Kathleen Reilly**

Director of Training
Tri-State Consortium
203-762-2004
kathleenreillyct@gmail.com

Danielle Sullivan

Interim Director of Technology & Innovation
Brewster
Brewster High School
50 Foggintown Road, Brewster, NY 10509
845-279-5051 ext. 1157
dsullivan@brewsterschools.org

Anne Pecunia

Assistant Principal
Dobbs Ferry
Dobbs Ferry Middle School
505 Broadway, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522
914-693-1500 ext. 3006
pecuniaa@dfsd.org

Keith Schenker

Principal
Mt. Pleasant
Westlake High School
825 Westlake Drive, Thornwood, NY 10594
914-769-8311
kschenker@mtplcsd.org

Valerie Vacchio

Principal
Oyster Bay-East Norwich
James H. Vernon School
880 Oyster Bay Road, East Norwich, NY 11732
516-624-6589
vvacchio@obenschools.org

Felipe Orozco

ESL Supervisor
Port Chester-Rye
Port Chester Public Schools
113 Bowman Avenue, Rye Brook, NY 10573
914-934-7900
forozco@portchesterschools.org

Martin G. Brooks

Executive Director
Tri-State Consortium
631-478-9954
mgbrooks@optonline.net

“Engage students to continuously learn, question, define, and solve problems through critical and creative thinking.” (Mission: North Salem Central Schools)

The North Salem Central School District invited a Tri-State Consortium team to review its ongoing commitment to a mission centered on critical and creative thinking on April 26 - 28, 2017. North Salem is a longstanding and valued member of the Consortium; our mission statement describes our commitment as *“... a dynamic learning organization of public school districts that values systems thinking as the foundation for continuous improvement. The Consortium assists its member districts in using quantitative and qualitative data to enhance student performance and to build a rigorous framework for planning, assessment and systemic change. Collaborating as colleagues and critical friends, Consortium members apply the standards of the Tri-State model to benchmark member districts’ progress in advancing teaching and learning.”* As the Consortium enters 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.

North Salem Central School District is comprised of an elementary school, Pequenakoack (PQ) and a combined North Salem Middle/High School with a population of 1107 students. Central Office leaders include a decade-long partnership of Superintendent, Dr. Kenneth Freeston and Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Michael Hibbard, who created the current mission through a collaborative, iterative process that began in 2009 with the formation of the mission committee. The administrative team will experience some changes at the

close of the 2016 - 2017 school year with the retirement of Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Michael Hibbard, and North Salem Middle/High School's principal, Dr. Pat Cyganovich, and assistant principal, Dr. George Bovino. With changes ahead, the sustainability of the mission as a core focus is very much on the minds of the North Salem community.

The Tri-State team, composed of elementary, middle, and high school teachers, and school and district-level administrators from member districts, spent three days examining documents associated with the work of the district related to its mission, including examples of problem solving tasks for students at all school levels. The documents allowed the visiting team a glimpse into the evolution of the North Salem mission since its inception, and how the cycle of problem solving informed a spiral of continuous improvement and profiles of students as problem solvers at benchmark points in their North Salem education journey. The Tri-State team's intent is to provide feedback that supports the district to sustain the core of its mission to "Engage students to continually learn, question, define, and solve problems through critical and creative thinking.", while continuing to allow the mission to grow with changing leadership at central office and the middle and high school. The goal of the Tri-State team is to affirm and confirm the district's efforts toward this worthy and thoughtful mission, and to offer recommendations that can further the district's efforts.

The format for this visit was structured as a Consultancy; that is, our three days in the district consisted of an opening presentation by the district, a series of interviews, school-based observations, a review of digital artifacts associated with the district's mission work over time, examples of student work displayed in the

library, and a culminating protocol that facilitated a conversation between North Salem representatives and Tri-State team members.

Prior to our arrival in the district, we received detailed information about the district's growth and process of deciding on a central statement, a mission, which would guide educators and students as they learned to rely on student engagement, problem solving, and critical and creative thinking. We also received the agreed-upon Essential Questions developed by the district's Tri-State Steering Committee. These Questions are designed to establish the intended focus for the team, and they also guide our thinking as we develop our own inquiry during the three days.

The essential questions for the Tri-State Consortium consultancy were:

- **To what degree is the Mission having an impact on students in and out of the classroom?**
- **To what degree are Mission-linked instruction and learning embedded in the culture of the district?**

North Salem's work to revisit strategic goals and focus on curriculum design and thinking skills began with Dr. Freeston and Dr. Hibbard's tenure in the district in 2007. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent scanned the horizon and identified the need to revisit the district mission. Deeming acquisition of content to be insufficient in preparing their students for the world they will enter when they graduate, the leaders sought deeper meaning and relevance to the work. The work of thought leaders, such as Dr. Tony Wagner, drove their thinking. A mission committee was formed in 2009, which ultimately designed and

implemented a new mission. Since that time, the district has engaged a broad group of varied stakeholders to assess and sustain the mission through a model of continuous improvement as problem solvers. The laser-like focus on problem solving enabled the district to simplify its purpose, but also to energize the entire school community. The support of teachers and administration, the Board of Education, community members, parents, and students has been an integral part of the thoughtful and purposeful focus on the district's mission.

Throughout our time in North Salem, we heard clear and unified support for the district mission and a sense of pride in the strong professional culture that espouses the importance of student learning through a process of questioning, defining, and solving problems through critical and creative thinking. The consistent, unwavering focus on the mission as the core, and not another additional initiative, was evident in our review of district artifacts, conversations with teachers, students, parents, administrators and Board members. This focus was nothing short of remarkable during a time period of high stakes testing, financial crisis, a new teacher evaluation mandate and state level budgeting process changes.

The district's Essential Questions asked the visit team to focus on the degree to which the Mission is having an impact on students in and out of the classroom and the degree to which Mission-linked instruction and learning are embedded in the culture of the district. The team was asked specifically to focus on:

- The impact of the Mission on instruction -- Problem Solving Tasks (PST), day to day instruction, and more;
- The impact of Mission on students in and out of school;

- The factors most responsible for the district’s successes, and why those factors were important; and
- The possible next “Gorillas” or obstacles and how they might be avoided.

Response to Essential Questions, Commendations and Suggestions for Future Exploration

The Tri-State team concluded, after examining artifacts, interviewing and observing teachers and students as they engaged in the classroom that there is strong evidence to support the staff’s commitment to the district Mission. There is a clear understanding of critical and creative thinking, as well as the importance of generalization to the world beyond the district’s reach. Teachers, students and parents provided examples of how district educators approach problems within and outside the academic environment and describe the results that help them succeed in challenging situations. Tony Wagner said, “The world no longer cares what you know. What the world cares about is what you do with what you know.” This statement captures the district’s thoughtful goal to prepare students for a life beyond mastery of content and skills.

To what degree are Mission-linked instruction and learning embedded in the culture of the district?

The Mission-linked instruction and learning is deeply embedded in the culture of the district. The team felt a tremendous sense of ownership and pride in the Mission work and a feeling that the district views this work as dynamic; they live

the beliefs of the cycle of continuous improvement. As the work matured since the establishment of the district mission, the evidence was clear that the teachers developed assignments that gradually transitioned to push critical and creative thinking. Examples of this were seen in the 2.0 version of PSTs, social problem solving and the implementation of a “genius hour” that the team learned about at PQ. The Department Chairs shared their view of the mission as “...who we are not what we do”, which speaks well to the cultural beliefs rooted in the Mission. Throughout visits to classrooms, we observed students engaged in meaningful learning experiences, making sense to form understanding, raising questions, collaborating, and making their thinking “visible”. The students were adept in their ability to explain their problem solving process in and out of school, and how the cycle of problem solving has integrated into their daily lives. Additionally, as teachers became more comfortable with the problem-solving process over time, the attributes of critical and creative thinking began to surface as a primary focus.

Parents expressed strong support for the link between the Mission and the culture of the district. They noted a shift from a focus on grades to a focus on process. Their children exhibit traits they believe are a result of the Mission: independence, perseverance or grit, and collaboration. Parents feel that the district provides a strong support system for students and they have benefitted from training and articulation of the Mission through PTO meetings, online information on Mission Mondays, portraits of a graduate, and formal and informal meetings with district staff. There is a sense that the Mission is embedded and will continue even with the leadership changes ahead. “The mission is everywhere.”

The team wondered how the strongly held beliefs of the district regarding the Mission might be examined more closely in the transfer to daily instructional practice and student learning. The PSTs have evolved over time and include solid examples of opportunities for students to solve problems through critical and creative thinking. Since the team examined more evidence of the teacher-created tasks and did not have a great deal of student work to review, it was challenging to assess the extent to which the process of the learning experience leading up to the PST was embedded in the teaching and learning culture on a day-to-day basis. Teachers spoke of a shift from covering content to metacognition and the transferability and application of lifelong skills. How to qualify or quantify the evidence of this transfer of understanding to a real world context and student ownership might be an area to explore as the PSTs continue to grow. Specifically, while there was evidence of student choice in many examples we viewed, the students' reflection about their learning process and purposeful selection of product form and audience was less clear and might be developed as a tool for teachers to give the process and metacognitive elements of the PSTs a more visible role in the planning process.

There has been a noted effort to enhance the Mission's presence within PQ initiatives and a sense that the problem solving process is alive and well in the elementary school, as well as at the middle/high school. There were a number of teachers who expressed a need for more professional collaboration between the elementary and middle/high school. While positive changes were noted, an increased emphasis on K-12 articulation would further support the good work going on in each building. The teachers shared that there are opportunities for cross grade level work in content areas, but not for the Mission committee. With

a professional culture in both buildings so attuned to the Mission, a cross level committee could generate more discussion to strengthen the vertical articulation and further refine the benchmark snapshots of students as problem solvers. Teachers also wondered if future professional development time might include an opportunity to create Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The visiting team suggests that PLCs might be a way to bridge the two buildings' professional communities.

To what degree is the Mission having an impact on students in and out of the classroom?

There was pervasive and compelling evidence of a healthy, growing Mission in the district. The visiting team spent a great deal of time in discussion about how to assess the degree of impact on students beyond our anecdotal takeaways from observations and discussions. We wondered how to differentiate between the assessment of learning and the assessment for learning, and thought both areas were worthy of conversation. Because of the strong commitment of the district community, there is tremendous potential in the possibility of identifying the impact on student learning. Together, with support from all stakeholders, they have created a culture that is solid, in part, because of the belief that the Mission comes first, and standardized testing and other mandates need to fit into the district's core Mission. We applaud the district for resisting the pressure to label or quantify learning that is as much to do with process as it does the product. This is a challenge that faces all districts, and North Salem is perfectly positioned to be a regional, and national, leader in meeting this challenge.

If the degree of impact on students is adequately assessed through anecdotal feedback, the team found strong evidence that there is a belief that the Mission impacts their learning in and out of school. Examples of social problem solving and the district description surveys that included graduates certainly speak to a place that values thinking and problem solving that extends beyond assignments and the K-12 experience. The team found it more difficult to assess the impact through student work aligned to a rubric of the problem solving cycle or the portraits of student as problem solver. Since many students were observed in classrooms explaining their thinking, prompted by questioning techniques used by teachers, we wondered how artifacts of the learning process coupled with student work products might provide a picture of student of problem solver along varying degrees. This examination and discussion of student work would support a review of the assessment for learning. How can student work inform changes to curriculum, instruction and assessment? This topic came up several times during interviews and in our final debrief. There appears to be strong support for a process that would enable teams to work through student work examination protocols and this seems a logical next step. There is exciting opportunity to align this work across the K-12 spectrum through the thoughtful analysis of student work.

The Problem Solving Tasks (PST) provide a structure for the Mission that is tangible and curriculum-based in all classrooms. The purposeful effort to validate existing teacher-created PSTs engaged the staff in a manner that brought ownership and teacher leadership to the Mission work. Teachers described a creation and revision process that encouraged risk-taking and exploration, very much aligned with the desired learning experiences for students. The visiting

team learned from students that the PSTs motivate them to connect the problem solving cycle and critical and creative thinking with the tasks. They were able to distinguish between critical and creative thinking and even provide a visual model with the movement of their hands. The visiting team wondered how the PSTs could grow through an examination of the evidence of the cycle of problem solving, as well as the outcomes or products of learning produced in PSTs.

We urge the district to gather more data to assess the impact of the Mission on students. The data might be soft or impressionistic as long as the district has a way to codify them. The district might consider identifying a process of collecting common tasks across the K-12 spectrum, and applying an analytical protocol that not only captures quantified student performance, but also anecdotal trends. Such a system could offer the district an opportunity to evaluate the system at certain inflection points along the journey that ultimately culminates in the portrait of the North Salem graduate. The team was asked to consider how the system would sustain their work to accomplish the Mission and we believe that it will be necessary to unpack the process and product of Mission-related learning experiences in order to sustain and grow the laudable work in place. Since the engagement of staff, the Mission committee, Board of Education and community stakeholders has been such an integral part of this work, the continued involvement will be critical to sustain the work in new ways.

In 1966 Buffalo Springfield sang, “There’s something happening here.” The visiting team playfully echoed this phrase as we were struck with wonder about the very special teaching and learning community that is North Salem. We felt fortunate to have the opportunity to spend three days engaged in exploration and

discussion with such passionate and committed educators and community supporters. This is a place that embraces risk-taking for all the right reasons. They are focused on students and their ability to develop thinking and problem solving capacity that will serve them well beyond their time in North Salem.

The Tri-State team commends North Salem for its careful attention to crafting articulate essential questions. We all felt a warm welcome from the beginning of day one, and were especially struck by the articulate and involved students, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, who were the ambassadors who met us at the door and helped us navigate through the buildings. They also paused to explain what and how they were learning and how the work of the Mission is a part of the district experience. Special thanks to the staff of the middle/high school for providing us the library space and access to materials, and were always available to answer questions or spend extra time to allow us to expand our understanding of the work. The hospitality was greatly appreciated, as were the afternoon snacks that kept us going each day!