
District : Chappaqua

Superintendent: John Chambers, Interim Superintendent

Focus: Use of Strategic Question to Drive Improvement

Dates of Visit: March 23-25, 2011

District Coordinator: Lyn McKay, Assistant Superintendent

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The Chappaqua Public School district joined the Tri-State Consortium in 2002, and has sustained its commitment to the core beliefs of collegiality, optimal student performance, and triennial peer review. The Tri-State Consortium mission statement describes, *“...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.”*

The Chappaqua leaders invited a team of representatives from the Tri-State Consortium to reflect on the progress of the district initiative centered on learner-centered instruction. The charge of the Chappaqua team falls into a unique and developing category of Tri-State visits that are designed to examine questions related to work around 21st century learning teaching and learning. Toward that end, the team was crafted to include a number of members that participate in an ongoing Tri-State Consortium study groups related to this issue. In addition, the design of the visit – including the protocols, evidence presentation and consultancy - was customized to serve the needs of Chappaqua as represented in the charge.

The Tri-State Visiting Team spent three days, March 23-25 2011, observing, interviewing and reflecting with Chappaqua Board members, parents, educators and students. The school board's decision to use a strategic question as a guiding tool, rather than a more traditional set of strategic goals and action plans, represents the value the district places on inquiry, autonomy and exploration. This culture, combined with consistently strong student performances, provides the canvas on which the district is striving to create a more detailed picture of its vision for 21st century teaching and learning. The members of the Tri-State 21st Century Learning Task Force helped to craft a framework for a three day (visit process customized to examine the Board's strategic question:

How can the District ensure that all students think deeply, support their thinking, apply problem-solving skills, and actively participate in their learning as they acquire content knowledge?

Prior to our arrival in Chappaqua, Assistant Superintendent Lyn McKay provided a concise and informative document that described the Chappaqua Public Schools history as it pertains to the district's quest to **"Strive for Improvement through a Strategic Question"**. In 2007, the Chappaqua Board of Education, reflective of the aspirations and values of the schools and broader community, created two strategic questions designed to initiate conversation and decision-making linked directly to the demands and expectations for students in 21st century. The first BOE question addresses stewardship of resources; the second, which is most pertinent to the Visiting Team study, focuses on instructional strategies for teaching and leadership structures.

Many educators we interviewed agreed that in developing the strategic question, the BOE, indeed, has captured the core beliefs of the educators charged with enacting the vision on a daily basis. Many also indicated that after having used the question to set direction for several years, the timing seems right, to shift to a more specific and shared understandings of what the vision looks like in terms of teaching and learning across the K-12 system. The general responses of many interviewed was that this work could and should most appropriately be done by expert and dedicated administrators and teachers working collaboratively in professional learning communities (PLCs).

In the narrative, Chappaqua notes that they have "invited Tri-State colleagues to visit to help us determine to what extent we (both students and staff) have been able to respond to the Board's

teaching and learning strategic question and to help us determine the next steps in our quest for developing the critical and creative thinking of all students and staff. “

Chappaqua provided three Essential Questions to guide the Tri-State team in its study:

The first addresses *student learning*; the second *professional learning*; and the third the *continuous improvement process*. These three questions form the lens the TriState visiting team used to examine the array of evidence provided by the district and they also frame the consultancy protocol that is facilitated on the final day of the visit.

In order to respond to the three essential questions established by Chappaqua, the structure of day 1 and 2 included the activities described below. Reflection, analysis, planning and summary conversations were conducted by the Visiting Team between evidence gathering activities, thus allowing the visiting team to remain responsive and adaptive in our approach to our charge.

Day 1:

- A presentation by Chappaqua staff focused on the elements of teaching the district has identified as reflective of 21st century student learning as defined by the district strategic question. These elements were detailed in a graphic organizer that the Tri-State team used gather information during scheduled classroom walkthroughs. The opening presentation included classroom video clips the district has prepared for the community as a way of demonstrating what 21st century teaching and learning looks like in classrooms. The clips include extensive narration by teachers describing lesson design and what is occurring during the taped sequence in relationship to thinking, collaboration and problem solving.
- VT members, using the graphic organizer prepared by Chappaqua, participated in approximately forty, 15 minute classroom visits in schools across the district. Some were scheduled and others were unplanned drop-ins.
- VT members conducted a series of interviews with representatives from school community stakeholder groups including: Board of Education, central office, school administration, department and staff development leaders, teachers, parents and students. Questions were designed to be conversation starters and focused on the questions presented by the district. Care was taken to invite open conversation and an exchange of ideas since the stance of the team is one of critical friend rather than evaluator or auditor.

- The team viewed evidence of curriculum, instruction, and professional development projects and student work organized and made available in the computer lab.

Day 2:

- Evidence gathering conversations were conducted with students and teachers throughout the day. Those interviewed represented a cross section of each stakeholder group. Approximately 180 students and 99 teachers were invited to participate in these 25-minute small group sessions.

Day 3

- The National School Reform Faculty Critical Friend's protocol was used to examine and reflect on the questions presented by the district. This protocol involves approximately eight representative members from both the Tri-State Visiting Team and the district's steering committee. The conversation is facilitated by a trained Tri-State staff member and follows a process designed by the Annenberg Institute which includes clarifying and probing questions, a VT consultancy conversation focused on the district's Essential Questions and a reflection on the consultants' observations and recommendations by members of Chappaqua's inner circle. The consultancy is viewed by an outer circle formed by members of the VT and district steering committee; approximately 30 people were in attendance. In addition, this event was videotaped.
- TriState Executive staff and the visit co-leaders met Chappaqua district administrators and steering committee leaders to "debrief" the visit and to share emerging summary points. Both the internal steering committee and the Visit Team viewed this experience as a productive visit inspired and shaped by a district that was characterized by one of the VT members as a *thinking district*.

Essential Question Summary Points

As with any complex vision, there is a constant interplay between the gestalt – the impressionist version of the whole- and the individual points of color spread across the canvas- any one of which can best be appreciated for its singularity. It is only when the points are viewed as a whole that a clear and detailed picture emerges. Deconstructing the work of the district is a bit like examining each stroke of paint in a Monet; it may be necessary to do so to gain an appreciation of the whole and to plan the design and

execution of future master level works; however, such analysis must be recognized as an intermediary step in the process of creating great art. The following analysis is offered in that vein; organization of key points using the framework of the district's essential questions is a technically expedient way of providing feedback and recommendations. It is left to Chappaqua to determine how to combine the summary points to create a coherent and artfully crafted system that satisfies patrons and inspires future generations to build on the body of your work.

EQ1: Student learning

To what extent do you see evidence of students?

- Generating ideas rather than reporting?
- Generating questions, identifying problems, and solving problems?
- Making choices and monitoring their own learning?
- Engaging in conversations that exhibit accountable talk?

Observations and suggestions of the Visiting Team: The time spent in classrooms, in dialogue with students, and examining student work across schools and levels, lead the Tristate Visiting Team (VT) to conclude that there are a number of individual teachers and in some cases, teacher teams, designing lessons and implementing instruction consistent with the behaviors defined on the data gathering protocol provided to the team by the Chappaqua steering committee. The Visiting Team estimated that students were engaged in higher order thinking, including analysis (identification of patterns) and creation of solutions to problems presented by teachers in approximately 25-50% of the classrooms observed. However, we visited each room only once and for a very brief period of time, and we are unable to gauge the consistency of this engagement. These types of learning behaviors and learning environments are also evident on the narrated videos created by the district; the focus of these to date has been on the teacher metacognition. One recommendation of the VT is to expand the use of video clips. Although they are a strong means of communicating the importance of 21st century learning to the community they also can serve as a professional development opportunity to allow teachers to collaboratively analyze learning and teaching in the context of the BOE strategic question.

Observations and interviews across levels indicate that in some classes (25-50%), students are offered choice (often designed by the teacher); presented with teacher generated questions requiring analysis, evaluation, synthesis and creation and demonstration of “knowledge”; and are actively engaged in higher order thinking during class. These conditions seemed to be most consistently evident in the language arts classes and visual arts classes observed by the VT. Questions about the degree to which choices are meaningful and the extent to which accountable talk, feedback and self assessment are deepening student understanding, are both areas deserving of further study.

The staff and parents we interviewed enthusiastically supported the district vision of students as critical and creative thinkers, and indeed, believe that the Board of Education, in creating the strategic question, wisely reflected the beliefs and aspirations of the professional and greater community. To a person they appear to “get the big picture.” It is when moving from that perspective to the details that lack of clarity, specificity and coherence become points of discussion. Teachers appreciate autonomy and interpret it as a sign of respect for their expertise and professionalism, a perspective that was validated by administrators and representative Board of Education and community members. As was noted in the introductory section above, some members of each adult group wondered whether it might not be an opportune time to develop a more purposeful connectedness to the work through shared understanding of the terms detailed on the data gathering protocol; they see these as representing foundational principles and practices that are at the core of the shared vision.

The promise of such an approach seemed most consistently evident to the Visiting Team in the Language Arts classes and interviews conducted with Language Arts teachers. In approximately 50% of these classes, VT members heard shared language, observed similar instructional arrangements and practices, and saw students engaged in productive, collaborative work and self reflection representative of the 21st century learning embedded in the essential questions. The Team wonders about the relationship between the observed consistency and the extensive and sustained training of the department by consultants and coaches who share an approach to literacy; Chappaqua staff lent credence to this perspective during the consultancy and debrief

when they too noted that curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional learning best overlap in Language Arts as a result of a more systematic and systems based approach to curriculum and instruction (in this regard an important distinction was made between a *systems approach* and a *standardized approach* as discussed later in this document.)

The professionals and community members interviewed noted that in order to ensure equitable access to curriculum, instruction and assessment designed to develop understandings, skills and performances required of learners in the 21st century, shared understandings and performance expectations need to be developed across grades and, as appropriate, across departments – for both students and teachers. The Visiting Team concurs with this conclusion. This work, should the system choose to pursue it, can and should be undertaken by the highly expert and dedicated faculty that Chappaqua has carefully hired and has empowered as members of professional learning communities. Devoting professional learning time and resources to the development of coherent and connected set of understandings and performance expectations uniquely designed to reflect Chappaqua’s mission and goals is work that could inspire and connect educators across levels and ultimately across departments. The VT heard this idea presented from individuals representing an array of stakeholder groups and therefore recommends it be explored as a central part of the next phase of Chappaqua’s continuous improvement planning process.

As was discussed during the consultancy, it is difficult to monitor and impact student progress or those understandings and skills that are highly valued using traditional assessments. Without a continuum of such expectations being laid out across the grades (K-12) by Chappaqua teachers who are expert in their discipline as well as 21st century literacies (skills), it will be challenging to teach *all* students to self assess and to set progressively more challenging goals. Such work would help the district to ensure *all* students are steadily progressing toward the goal of being independent learners, deep thinkers and collaborative work team members.

Defining and sharpening the focus of the district vision “by design” versus “through standardization” seemed to resonate with all stakeholders as an approach consistent with the district culture. Teachers interviewed by the Tri-State visiting team members indicated they

would welcome the challenge, perhaps as part of ongoing professional development work, to work collaboratively and in Professional Learning Communities to create local assessments that reflect learning outcomes and dispositions the valued by the school community. As conceptualized by Chappaqua staff and administration during some of the interviews, part of their professional work could include validating common learning activities and assessments; such calibration would relate to progress monitoring and reporting of student growth and program outcomes and would guide teachers and teams in making differentiated instructional decisions. It would also guide teacher shared and differentiated professional learning and growth, a domain which teachers and the district greatly value.

EQ2: Professional learning

To what extent is the system supporting teachers and administrators so that they may engage in evidence based conversations about student learning, in which they have opportunities to respectfully discuss differing perspectives and opinions?

Observation and suggestions of the Visiting Team: In reviewing Chappaqua materials and listening to Chappaqua Board of Education and professional staff, it is clear that all stakeholder groups value inquiry, research, study and learning as engines of self improvement and as sources of effective practice and performances. This ethos – the valuing of individual and collaborative study and learning- permeates the Chappaqua culture and seems to apply equally to students and adults. As noted above, the Visiting Team characterized Chappaqua as a thinking community, and as a result professional development/learning is recognized as a strategic tool through which improvement is designed and fueled. In addition to sharing this underlying value, the district benefits from what appears to be strong support for the Board strategic question both with respect to content – the importance of “21st century learning” in the acquisition of content knowledge — and as an approach to inspiring continuous improvement- inquiry versus prescriptive strategic goal setting and action planning.

The community is commended for the support provided to professional development including partnerships with experts such as Lucy West, Ellin Keene, and Richard Allington. Affiliation with institutions of higher education such as Columbia University and Harvard University allow

Chappaqua educators to develop research-based practices central to the district mission. Some of the teachers and administrators interviewed indicated that such opportunities seem to them to have their greatest impact when a systematic plan for building internal capacity to oversee the structure of training, coaching and evaluation to district staff was in place. The language arts initiative stands out as an example of how consultants can be used to develop a district approach to teaching for deeper understanding.

Increasing clarity of expectations and moving from discretionary to full participation in targeted district initiatives were cited by some as a means of developing common understanding of professional learning goals and resulting shared practices. Although recognized as a bit outside a district culture that values autonomy, teachers and administrators view these expectations as important steps to reaping the full benefit of staff and community investment in professional development and training. How to decide which approaches and initiatives are innovations limited to individuals and teams, and which are so central to the district mission as to be required as system-wide practice, is a question that was raised during several interviews and again during the consultancy.

Examples of the types of professional work that might be positively impacted by the designation of such a distinction (system-wide vs. discretionary) include: the use of learning walks as a means of gathering data specific to the district guiding question and the development of shared operational definitions and observation tools that examine evidence of student learning and growth.

In the domain of professional learning, the Teacher Action Research Program (TARP) stands out as a model representative of the district mission and professional learning culture. TARP is cited by faculty and administrators as a powerful tool that has the potential not only to build teacher capacity but also district capacity. Those involved indicate that they have been challenged and strengthened by the opportunity to study and pursue unique research with a cohort of peers. The annual Learning Symposium, during which teachers share their responses to problems of practice, is an example of the district's recognition of the valuable resource that exists by virtue of a curious staff dedicated to continuous improvement of practice.

It may be that many teachers and administrators are ready to move from sharing of practices to critical examination of practice using Professional Learning Community protocols. Tools that may be expanded for this purpose are the classroom videos, which if used in conjunction with the observation tool provided to the VT, could provide teachers with a means of studying student learning as impacted by various curriculum, instructional and assessment designs and practices. This kind of growth-producing professional study is consistent with and reflective of the culture of inquiry and collaboration being developed as an essential part of classroom learning environment for all students.

EQ3: Suggestions for next steps (continuous improvement)

- What questions should we think about?
- What are systematic supports and constraints that may be helping or hindering people in doing this work?

The Visiting Team was left with the impression that many of the professional staff, Board of Education members, parents and students would value the district connecting and systematizing some of the many points of excellence that have developed as a result of the professional learning, research and training undertaken. This would further the district mission and would allow the district to be explicit in sharing results related to student learning uniquely valued by Chappaqua, much of which cannot be measured by standardized assessments. Recognition that this must be done with the active involvement of the faculty and without sacrificing their shared valuing of responsiveness, autonomy and creativity, make it even more imperative that the work be explicit, transparent and inclusive.

Chappaqua is fortunate in that it is working from a position of strength as measured by an array of indicators that students and parents value. The Board of Education has established a mission, through a set of guiding questions, which reflects the values and goals of the community and teaching staff; specifically, to prepare students for the challenges of a complex and dynamic world. The administrators and teacher leaders have established an array of relationships, mechanisms and practices that reflect the standards of a professional

learning community dedicated to the challenges of continuous improvement. Staff has been hired and developed using the highest standards of professionalism. Students and parents have high aspirations and value learning and education.

The Tri-State team concluded that if any district is equipped to take on the challenge of the next stage of transforming as a system it would be Chappaqua. The work is not easy because it involve introducing systematic and systemic into the vocabulary of the district and requires an evolution in culture, mindset, goals and practices; it also requires that each stakeholder view her or himself as a part of a system that by design, in approach, is more than the sum of its parts.

The payoff for the difficult conversations that might accompany this next stage of growth is professional learning that serves both the system and individuals equally as well.

Developing a clearly defined continuum of student learning outcomes will allow not only teachers but also all students to monitor and assess their own growth related to 21st century learning goals.

In response to Chappaqua's request that the Visiting Team pose potential questions designed to propel the next phase of the district's work, we respectfully offer the following not as an exhaustive but rather as a representative list of questions and related suggestions:

- Is the timing right for this next stage of the work? How do you know or how will you know when you are ready to become more systemic and systematic in your work?
 - We respectfully suggest the district is, in many ways, poised to move into the next stage of transformative work because of its many strengths and because the current political context around standardized measures of success provides a compelling reason to do so.
 - We reiterate that there is good conceptual support among the teachers for this work. We suggest that the district develop plans for greater inclusion of teachers' voices in order to transition from a culture of support to a culture of ownership.

- How can the district facilitate the development of a more widespread and shared understanding of the Board of Education vision at the level of classroom teachers since it is they who are collectively responsible for ensuring all students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills implied by the vision?
 - Teachers expressed agreement with the vision implied in the Board of Education question but noted that it does not have enough specificity to impact their professional work at the level of the classroom. They expressed a desire to use professional learning and development time to bring more specificity and coherence to bear.
 - Is the district ready to make structural changes in order to communicate the importance of this initiative more directly to the staff? One example of would be including the thinking skills embedded in the EQs into the district's supervision and evaluation processes. Other examples include altering the district's reporting and grading systems and organizing school schedules to provide more planning time for this work.
- With respect to moving continually toward realizing your mission as measured by teacher and student performances: What areas would most benefit from a more systematic and systematized approach?
 - The VT respectfully suggests two potential starting points: First, utilize the operationalized definitions of higher order learning included in the observation evidence organizer provided to the VT along with video taped classroom segments to begin collaboratively studying student learning in relationship to teaching; and second, develop a continuum of benchmark experiences/assessments that capture what staff identify as reflective of deep content knowledge and 21st learning. These can serve to progress monitor those learning goals outside of traditional measures yet which are valued by staff and can also help students develop independence and self efficacy as learners.

- As the initiative moves forward, we also recommend that the district monitor the balance between the process standards embedded in the EQs and course and grade level content.
- How can staff move from sharing practices to learning from them?
 - The VT suggests educators may want to bring a more systematic approach to use of Professional Learning Community protocols such as walk throughs, learning walks and critical friends groups. Continuing such practices as full administrative team training and calibration, Learning Symposium and TARP with the intent of using such initiatives to inform and create system knowledge is capacity building.

In closing, the Visiting Team was impressed by the degree of shared vision and the high level of commitment to students that was evident throughout every element and aspect of the visit. Most importantly, we were moved and inspired by your students; they were enthusiastic about learning and were highly complimentary of the teachers and the experiences they have had as members of the Chappaqua school community. The many students the team had the opportunity to observe and interview demonstrated confidence in themselves and their peers as learners and as productive contributors to their school community. The district's willingness to take on a new set of challenges to ensure *all* students achieve such success is inspiring and worthy of those willing to lead and engage in this work.

Special thanks to the staff at Seven Bridges Middle School, who were most welcoming and assisted us throughout our three days based in the Common Room. The student ambassadors who greeted each member of the team when we arrived were articulate, curious about our work, and very proud of their school. Cheers to Lyn McKay's secretary, Terry Delollio, who planned our breakfasts and lunches with careful attention to variety and surprises!

Commendations

- The Chappaqua Board of Education has made a sustained commitment to instructional improvement.
- The district is courageous and is “shooting high” on the essential questions, well beyond what the state’s tests require of students.
- The district leadership has made a strong commitment to professional development.
- The district has devoted significant resources and time (e.g., schedule changes) to the board’s strategic learning question.
- The system honors innovation. It is responsive to teachers’ ideas.
- The faculty is eager to learn and willing to change.
- The students interviewed from each level stated that they ~~love~~ like and respect their teachers.
- TARP has been transformative for many teachers.
- The Learning Symposium was deemed valuable by teachers.
- Students feel well prepared for their post-secondary school experiences and well educated.
- Students recognize and appreciate the district’s emphasis on higher order thinking.
- The Classroom Clips provide an excellent communication structure for the ~~public~~ school community by making teaching more public.
- The faculty meeting structure (e.g. Roaring Brook and Grafflin) has changed to generate more staff engagement.
- There is a willingness to run a grading pilot with no report card grades in English at Seven Bridges Middle School.
- Teachers and administrators have been involved in Instructional Rounds and Learning Walks.
- There are many opportunities for high schools students to make choices in course selection (e.g., Independent Study, March Mania, Indie Lit).
- There is strong alignment in K-4 math and ELA; professional development is well coordinated.

Recommendations

- Chappaqua's initiative is based on a sound Theory of Action. It might be helpful to engage the staff in more clearly defining the Problem of Practice on which the TOA is based.
- Teachers are supportive of the district's initiative, but are not yet fully connected to it. Aim for full knowledge/understanding/involvement of stakeholder groups (Parent/Teacher/Administrator/Student) in the board's Strategic Learning Question.
- Develop common understandings of concepts embedded in EQ #1, including rigor, and explicit models of what this looks like in the classroom.
- Consider repurposing Classroom Clips for professional development in regard to the above.
- Faculty expressed the need for a differentiated professional development plan that:
 - Incorporates a transfer of ownership and leadership to the teachers within a flexible structure that might be jointly designed by teachers and administrators,
 - Responds more closely to the needs of a wide range of teachers,
 - Provides time for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other.
- Connect instructional leadership role (and capacity) of building leaders and department leaders and teacher leaders to next level of work. Invest in leadership at all levels. Clarify leadership responsibilities among building, curriculum and teacher leaders. Who/what is catalyst for next steps? What systemic support is needed for the people doing the work? Prioritize resources.
- Identify existing actions, practices and plans that, while still situational, are so powerful that they have the capability to affect the entire system; Chappaqua will want to incorporate them systemically into the district practice.

- Use ELA, with its structure of sustained professional development and subsequent ownership by staff, as model for investing staff in the process, and transition the leadership/ownership to staff.
- Share the six-question observation form with staff; use this form for peer observation.
- Generate data around the attributes of EQ #1. Teachers might benefit from looking at student work, and using student work as way to assess progress on the attributes of EQ#1.
- Establish closer vertical and horizontal articulation in subject areas, especially for the transition years. Bring together teachers from the two middle schools ... and teachers from middle schools and high school for these discussions. Students spoke about the difficult transition from 6th to 7th grade – more, and more difficult, homework, and more testing.
- Explore possibility of turnkey professional development model using Teachers College (or other ~~vendors~~ external organizations) and interested staff members.
- Consider more follow up and follow through on professional development experiences, such as the Learning Symposium. Train workshop leaders on concepts embedded in EQ #1 so they can model for colleagues.
- Develop a structure for students to monitor their own learning, to make thinking and learning more visible, through such strategies as Metacognition; E-Portfolios; Tri-State indicators. The same process is recommended for teachers.
- Involve teachers more in the Instructional Rounds debriefing processes.
- Align report cards to emphasize concepts embedded in EQ #1.