

North Salem Central School District

TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2020

Student Engagement, March 4-6, 2020

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***North Salem Mission and Beliefs:***

***“Engage students to continuously learn, question, define and solve problems through critical and creative thinking.” (2009)***

**Executive Summary**

The Tri-State Consortium, a professional network of fifty-three public school districts in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York, assists its members in advancing student learning through a continuous improvement process. The North Salem Central School District is a long standing and valued member of the Consortium. Each district in the Consortium engages in ongoing self- study in preparation for triennial reviews that focus on selected topics. Acting as critical friends, visiting teams of fellow educators from Tri-State member districts provide external feedback about the host district’s current strengths and also suggest promising next steps. Over three days in the North Salem district, March 4-6, 2020, the Tri-State team analyzed evidence linked to the District Mission, shadowed students in classrooms to observe their engagement, and interviewed administration, faculty, students and Board of Education.

First adopted in 2009, the District Mission is to “Engage students to continuously learn, define, question and solve problems through critical and creative thinking” (PS/CCT) -- a statement that has been the touchstone for curricular and instructional decisions, grades K-12, ever since. North Salem has now gone through three cycles of self-examination and external visitation, each focusing on how efforts to realize the Mission have been implemented and how they’ve affected students’ understanding. Given the ongoing nature of the work, it seems useful to begin this report by briefly reviewing some earlier efforts to shape curriculum and instruction.

During the last three-day visiting team review in 2017, the team focused on the following two Essential Questions:

* 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?”

Subsequently, in a collegial follow-up visit April, 2019, representatives from the Consortium examined evidence of the District’s efforts over the previous two years. Many of the original Tri-State team returned to North Salem to find out how the District had chosen to respond to our Commendations and Recommendations. We learned that it had focused on enhancing building level collaboration and alignment from grades K through 12, as well as on documenting student work. For the current Tri- State team visit, March 4, 5, 6 of 2020, the District posed two Essential Questions:

* To what extent does our instruction provide opportunities for student engagement with our Mission?
* To what extent are our students engaged with our Mission?

The 15-member visiting team included teachers, department chairs, assistant principals, principals, central office administrators, and Consortium staff. The District prepared a comprehensive schedule for the visitors, including classroom visits, a meeting with Board members, and focus groups with students, teachers, and administrators at each school. It also provided digital artifacts for the visitors to review. These included representative learning tasks, as well as examples of student work, from grades K-12.

Dr. Ken Freeston, district superintendent, and Dr.Julio Vazquez, Director of Instruction and Human Resources, made introductory presentations to the team, which then reviewed the digital materials and completed school visits and interviews. After considering this evidence, the team shared its initial insights with the district staff in a two-way dialogue, using an established protocol. A brief exit interview with district leaders concluded the visit. This report summarizes our reflections.

The North Salem staff ably managed the logistics of the visit, for which the team offers our thanks. Board of Education members we met were thoughtful, aware of their responsibilities to the community and at the same time concerned foremost for children’s education. The entire staff was generous: teachers welcomed us into their classrooms and reflected openly on the work at hand. Students offered their insights sincerely and were excited to share their views. Administrators were eager for candid, constructive feedback. Of particular note was the number of respected senior faculty who are deeply committed to Mission-driven work.

**Background**

Over the last 11 years, North Salem has made a sustained effort to translate its Mission into visible, embedded actions that are consistent from building to building. Many districts see leadership come and go and watch one new priority follow another. As a result, that, in itself, is both unusual and admirable. The Board, district and school leadership, and the faculty deserve credit for staying the course.

It is hard to maintain this kind of fidelity when so many pressures cause schools and teachers to fragment their efforts. Children’s social and emotional health seems to become more of a worry with each passing year, for example. External forces — safety concerns, issues of public health — drain time and energy from academics, making it harder to engage in the kind of reflection and professional discourse that move professional practice forward. Competition for higher scores and better rankings continues to push teachers to get students to perform well on state tests, as distinct from doing what will enable them to be productive, fulfilled adults.

Further, North Salem, in particular, has chosen to do demanding, long-term, work for which there is no simple roadmap. These efforts have borne fruit: faculty and students know, can describe and can discuss the Mission and/or the skills and knowledge that grow out of it. One example of the impact of Mission-driven work is the number of fifth graders who exhibit capacities such as perseverance, clarity and empathy in their daily work and who regularly use “Habits of Mind” language to describe them. Another example is the meaningful number of students who can draw a direct line between the critical or creative thinking they’re doing and Mission language itself.

North Salem has attempted to translate the Mission into action through a phased plan to involve teachers and to influence teaching at every level and in all subjects. Implementation can still end up being inconsistent, however. Different students may have different kinds or levels of exposure to skills and ideas the District wants everyone to learn. For instance, not all have equal opportunity to learn to improve their thinking through solving complex problems.

There are many reasons for the inconsistency. For example, we’ve already noted the difference between preparing students to get good scores on Regents tests and teaching them to identify and strategize to solve a thorny problem. Different teachers prioritize these activities differently.

Further, there’s the age-old tension between desirable consistency and desirable individuality in teaching. If all students are to become able thinkers and problem-solvers, their school experience must be coherent and reasonably consistent. At the same time, variability can be desirable; great teachers are creative, exercise initiative and share professional passions with their students.

In addition, it’s generally unproductive to try to force semi-autonomous professionals to adopt practices they’re not ready to implement. And time and other resources to understand and resolve these issues — to develop, share and implement new approaches, for example — are limited to begin with. These are only a few of the parameters that shape North Salem’s efforts to improve. As we said, there is no simple roadmap.

This is the context for North Salem’s efforts to make thinking skills and problem-solving a planned part of every student’s education. Complicated though the context is -- and largely because it is so complex -- those efforts are on the leading edge of practice, nation-wide. The District is doing the right work; it is brave to have taken it on. What it learns from the next steps on its journey can make an important contribution to education in America.

**Response to Essential Questions**

During the self-study process, the District’s Steering Committee developed Essential Questions to guide the thinking of the visiting team during its time in the schools and to help team members focus their attention.

**Essential Question #1:**

***To what extent does our instruction provide opportunities for engagement with the Mission?***

One can describe instruction (program, curriculum and teaching) as if it existed in isolation. To enhance instruction, however, one must also examine how the organization works more broadly and how it might be strengthened. Specifically, that means looking at 1. the organizational culture that fosters practice 2. the process or processes the District uses to translate the Mission into culture and practice, 3. the character of leadership that initiates those processes, 4. the governance that facilitates leadership and 5. the guiding presence of a District-wide focus on the Mission.

**Discussion**

* **Instruction** — In North Salem, expectations are high and academics valued at both the elementary and secondary levels. In the elementary classes we observed, there were significant opportunities for student collaboration and cooperative learning. At the secondary level, we observed strong teaching. While the majority of secondary teachers are aware of the expectation that lessons will directly reflect the Mission, however, implementation varies for the reasons we noted above. Mission-related teaching/learning was evident in the Gifted and Talented program and in AP classes; several AP students said they were learning skills for life, not just the test. In other classes we observed, there was less evidence of teaching aimed at higher order thinking or problem-solving.

In our conversations with elementary grade teachers, we heard about the importance of developing students’ reading and math skills. At the same time, desirable Mission-related initiatives and, now, FLES, can compete with that work. A number of questions arose: How have the initiatives and FLES affected reading and math instruction, both in terms of time and effectiveness? Would it be helpful to identify where the content of initiatives and the “basics” coincide or, perhaps, even reinforce one another? What specific reading skills are students struggling with; how can practice — curriculum mapping, for example — best address areas of need?

We also learned that transitions in curriculum and teaching approach are generally smooth from Kindergarten through senior year. However, there were questions about the transition between grade 5 and grade 6. It could make sense to review curriculum and methods on either side of this divide, looking in particular at continuity in efforts like the program Habits of Mind and the fifth grade student profile. Where are more coordination and articulation desirable?

More broadly, as we noted at the outset, different students have different exposure to Mission-related experiences; CCT/PS may or may not be embedded in the instruction they receive. With that in mind, would it be useful to develop more common understandings of what CCT/PS are, what they look like in practice and where they are taught in units and lessons? In that way educators’ work and their discussions of students’ progress could increasingly reflect common standards.

More specifically, it could be productive:

* to see where teaching is aligned with the way educators define CCT/PS,
* to develop protocols to help teachers identify where CCT/PS occur in units and lessons,
* to share examples of where and how CCT/PS are embedded — in AP and Gifted classes, for example — in order to spread practice,
* to look specifically at equity. Do students in higher level courses have more access to CCT/PS skills? What access do all students have to those courses?
* to consider the current and desired character of student discourse in classes and the frequency with which students initiate or drive learning,
* to define the desired role of problem-solving tasks, where they currently occur and where they might,
* to develop a protocol for using “deep dive” analyses of student work to improve instruction,
* to focus on critical thinking through Science 21 and in social studies.
* **Culture** — Relationships between staff and students are strong at both schools. Teachers are nurturing and concerned for the whole child. Our observations and conversations suggest that students feel known and cared about. There is a focus on the “we,” and a sense of community. One new student, for example, commented on the sense of inclusivity in North Salem. Another compared his former school with North Salem, describing the personal attention that is possible in the latter because of the favorable class sizes.

School district cultures are the sum total of norms and structures that evolve over time -- grading practices, bell schedules, homework regimens, report cards, for example. These norms and structures either support or hinder Mission-related work. The District might productively look at its cultural norms and organizational structures to determine where changes might embed Mission-related work more deeply in the student experience.

* **Process** — District committees are evidence of efforts to ensure that teacher voices are heard as work progresses. These groups meet regularly and are gaining clarity about their charges, as well as how those charges translate into practice. In particular, there’s been an effort to place the District’s multiple initiatives in perspective so that they’re understood as different aspects of a single enterprise, rather than as discrete, unrelated programs.

There is also growing understanding that teachers are not expected to implement all District initiatives in their entirety, all at once. Rather, the initiatives give faculty access to a “toolbox” that contains teaching strategies they can choose and adapt as appropriate to students’ needs.

We heard that faculty meetings often focus on Mission-related work. Hiring decisions consider candidates’ thinking about the Mission. The observation /evaluation process has been realigned to take Mission-related work into account. The District also works with respected consultants in the field, all of whom link their work to the Mission.

Questions about direction and priorities, as well as communication issues, are normal in complex organizations, especially when new initiatives are involved. North Salem is a complex organization that’s engaged in groundbreaking work. Therefore, predictably, we heard about these matters during our visit. In that connection, we think North Salem might consider:

* Further synchronizing the work of the new K-12 leadership team;
* Developing a protocol for sharing committee work with staff;
* Engaging staff in an effort to consolidate the number of initiatives by seeing where the same ideas with different names overlap and by putting the result in priority order;
* Deciding which specific initiatives should be an assured experience for every child and what could be more idiosyncratic;
* Helping faculty “range-finding” by developing descriptions of what well-realized CCT/PS instruction — perhaps in several different classes — might evolve into in 3 or 5 years;
* Re-telling the story of the District’s work so that staff can reconnect with its overarching goals and see how the pieces of the plan fit together;
* Clarifying the extent to which Mission-related work implies shifts to instructional practices; assessing the extent to which the staff understand that, and filling in the gaps.

Further, as we said earlier, there is always a tension between the virtues of systems thinking and those of teacher autonomy. There’s another between the virtues of top-down and bottom-up change. Those responsible for the whole picture often seek consistency; those who focus on parts often value independence. It could be helpful to acknowledge these tensions explicitly as decisions are made, so that all parties could be disposed to enter a dialogue aimed at finding an optimal balance, rather than to defend one side or another.

Finally, it goes almost without saying that North Salem's ambitious Mission-driven work demands professional time, effort and discourse, while “keeping school” is a busy job for faculty and leadership all by itself. To move productive change along, we encourage the District to find the dedicated time for this work, so that it is minimally interrupted by housekeeping and other normal operating tasks.

* **Leadership** — The new leadership is visible and supportive, and it models risk-taking for the faculty. Leaders gather evidence and data and use it to improve instruction.

We wondered how the transition in administration has affected understandings of the District’s Mission-driven work. Fresh eyes will necessarily see both the Mission and related initiatives differently, and new leaders need time to understand what may have seemed self-evident to their predecessors, as well as to sort what still makes sense from what might change.

In the near term, our team wonders if there are ways to simplify and/or to consolidate what has been a highly structured, rationalized, and complicated framework of ideas so that “the plan” is more accessible and digestible for all stakeholders, perhaps by “cross-walking” the initiatives growing from the Mission.

* **Governance** — The Board of Education members we met were thoughtful, aware of their responsibilities to the community ,and at the same time, committed to supporting Mission-focused work. They are seekingbetter ways to communicate with the community about it. Below (see Outcomes) our team offers suggestions that might be helpful in that regard.
* **Mission Focus** — Board of Education, faculty and administration commitment to the Mission appears to be widespread. Faculty and administration we talked with support the process of continuous improvement. At the elementary level, many teachers described their belief in the 4 C’s and Habits of Mind and described how those initiatives fit with the Mission. Middle and high school faculty we interviewed described how District initiatives have enhanced learning. They appear to do an effective job of communicating and reinforcing the Mission.

The visiting team suggests that the district consider ways to develop more common and deeper understandings of the Mission, perhaps by bringing the professional staff together to examine student work and exemplars. The team also wonders if the District would want to consider re-visiting the Mission — to include socio-emotional learning or citizenship more specifically, for instance.

Finally, we wonder if including parents more fully in Mission-driven work would help to develop community support for it.

**Essential Question #2:**

***To what extent are students engaged in the Mission?***

* **Outcomes** — Students the visiting team sawin classrooms were highly engaged in the work they were doing. We observed numerous instances of their demonstrating their ability to think critically. In primary classes, there was evidence of student discourse, personal goal-setting and acknowledging others’ thinking and ideas. At the elementary level more broadly, children had incorporated the language of the Habits of Mind frameworks into their discussions. At the secondary level, instruction tended to be more teacher-directed, and there was less student-student interaction. Many of the middle and high school students we interviewed talked about the Mission and how it is manifest in their classes. A number also said they see connections between what they are learning and the real world.

During our visit, some educators reflected on the difficulties involved in monitoring student growth. How can the District best evaluate whether students meet the criteria established in the profiles, for example?

More generally, we believe the District has identified an important next step: understanding the impact of Mission-related work on students. Currently, it is hard to know whether any particular student is getting better at CCT/PS. It may be even harder to know whether a whole group (cohort or grade) is progressing from year to year or whether a school is doing a better job of teaching it over a period of years. How can District staff evaluate CCT/PS in particular, as distinct from other skills and knowledge it is trying to impart?

One possibility is to do what the District did for us: organize and meet with focus groups of students to discuss the two essential questions that framed the visit. North Salem’s students are smart and articulate, and they have many ideas about ways in which Mission-related work has affected their thinking. It could also be helpful to ask teacher groups to examine existing exemplars of student work for specific evidence of critical and creative thinking and problem solving. Following that, they might figure out how to identify those capacities in students’ emerging work.

Further, if the professional staff could develop a meaningful “shorthand” description of how whole cohorts or grades perform relative to a high standard, they could better describe both group progress and their own collective progress. To do that, presumably, they would have to identify work that met a desired standard of quality, as well as ways to assess student mastery at that level. The challenge then would be to consolidate the resulting information so educators and laypeople alike would find it readily digestible. A compact, substantive, summary could be highly useful for tracking progress toward North Salem’s most important learning goals.

In addition, that information might help resolve the ongoing tension between the race for higher test scores and the quest for deeper learning. Specifically, it could be a counter-narrative to the “mathematically precise,” often superficial, and sometimes misleading, results of standardized exams. The Board, among others, would then have better information, which it could use to educate residents about the District’s good work in developing skills and the habits of mind graduates will need in college and in life as adults. Such an effort could be not only a step forward for the District, but an important contribution to the field at large.

Finally, the Tri-State team recognizes the high quality of the district’s professional staff, administrators and teachers who are collegial,deeply committed to their students, and available and eager to help each other as well. All of our conversations with students were punctuated with warm stories of class discussions, the welcoming culture of the buildings, and the consistent sense that a North Salem graduate is a problem solver, a solid citizen, who is equipped with the skills essential to success. Our creature comforts were well-served by the district staff, too! Special thanks to Dr. Vazquez for the crisp organization of the visit, and thanks to the Librarians who shared their space with us. We left North Salem energized and inspired by our experience and with the confidence that the Mission is alive and well!