

Chappaqua Central School District

Striving for Improvement Through a Strategic Question

Our Story

The Beginning

Ours is a story that began with an inquiry from our Board of Education and has resulted in the instructional mission of the Chappaqua Central School District. In 2007, the Chappaqua Board of Education, in an attempt to lead our district into the 21st Century, adopted two strategic questions, one focused on teaching and learning and one focused on responsible fiscal practices. The two questions have been at the forefront of our work in Chappaqua over the past four years and continually guide our actions. In increasingly difficult financial times in education and a time of strong state and federal control, we, along with colleagues in many of our neighboring districts, are striving to sustain our instructional priorities by deepening the focus on teaching and learning. Our key tool toward this focus is the following 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?

We have invited our Tri-State colleagues to visit this March 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.

Before the Board Question

As early as 2003 we were grappling with how to move beyond test scores to more creative and critical thinking for students. We believed, too, that adults needed opportunities to think creatively and critically as they engage in meaningful evidence-based conversations about student learning. We knew, as well, that the literature around professional development indicates that adult learning is best when it emerges from expressed needs and self-reflection and is deepened when both constructed and shared with others.

In 2005, as we continued to consider adult learning, we surveyed all staff regarding staff development and only 45% stated that professional development "sometimes" or "often" had an effect on student learning. We convened a two-day focus group that summer to address what we saw as an area needing improvement. Learning teams,

which are teams of teachers who choose a research question about their practice and determine how and for how long they will study together, emerged as a form of in-service. These learning teams were the beginning of having self-directed faculty inquiry as a cornerstone of teacher learning and were a pre-cursor to our present action research program.

During these same years, elementary staff had been working with Columbia University Teachers College to implement reading and writing workshop, while middle school mathematics teachers were working with Lucy West, national mathematics consultant, on implementing accountable talk as they moved toward introducing students to rich, authentic problems along with their standard math curriculum. The District brought Ellin Keene, literacy expert, to demonstrate for elementary teachers and administrators the use of effective classroom talk and thinking strategies, particularly in reading. Richard Allington, too, spoke to elementary and middle school teachers on several occasions, and the District adopted many of his research findings as our Core Principles for Reading and Writing, K-4.

Charting a complimentary course, administrators focused on conducting learning walks through classrooms and began discussing what active learning environments might look like. Their work was based on the research of Richard Allington, Ellin Keene, Carolyn Downey, and Lauren Resnick. The components that were the focus of the learning walks included:

- Nature of classroom talk (generating ideas rather than reporting; more student talk than teacher talk; real conversation vs. interrogation; authority that is distributed rather than central to the teacher; strategic thinking – describe how, show process)
- Nature of instruction (students generating questions and solving problems; students making choices and monitoring their own learning; instructional decisions based on student need; side-by-side coaching; students teaching one another; teachers providing specific demonstration and modeling; a variety of grouping)
- Materials/resources (multi-sourced instruction, use of materials beyond the text, students working in materials of appropriate complexity for engagement; materials appropriate to special needs; integrated technology)
- Student work (meaningful, problem-solving in nature; collaborative; driven by student interest; long-term more often than short-term; integrated and connected to other subjects/topics; focus on developing students' personal responsibility)

- Nature of assessment (clear, shared expectations; includes use of rubrics and performance assessment; feedback frequent and related to assessment criteria rather than a grade; focus on improvement and effort)

In addition, some administrators and teachers were having discussions about *How People Learn* (Bransford, et.al.) and/or about Lauren Resnick's *Principles of Learning* with an emphasis on accountable talk. At the same time, we changed our high school schedule (not without some concerns from some departments) to one that has longer periods (60 and 80 minutes) to allow for more active learning environments.

Following the Board Question

It is in the context described above that the Board teaching and learning strategic question was adopted in 2007. It immediately was considered at secondary department chair retreats over the summer of 2007, and departments more recently have been setting their own goals based on the Board question.

Thereafter, teacher summer curriculum work, which is selected based on application, was chosen if it related to developing the intent of the Board question. Prior to that time it was connected to district initiatives. Literacy work expanded to the middle school and some high school English classes with a focus on reading choice. A new literacy period was added to grades 6-8.

We also began to focus the generous grant support of the Chappaqua School Foundation on proposals that address our strategic question. We are now working to go beyond grant-based activities to a collaboration on larger, longer-range district priorities.

We provided a variety of in-service courses to support the Board's question. They included courses around accountable talk, student independence, instructional strategies in longer class periods (high school), and reflective teacher courses for probationary teachers that focused on self-assessment and inquiry.

We developed a Teacher Action Research Program (TARP). It is a two-year program for teachers and administrators, who are selected by application. This program has been well-received and is serving its second cohort. To date, we have had 38 participants, 19 in the first cohort and 19 in the second cohort. And finally, we instituted annual learning symposia on Superintendent Conference Days when teachers share their work or their problems of practice in 45-minute roundtable sessions throughout the morning. In the fall of 2010 over 90 teachers and administrators provided over 60 sessions.

Our parent community began learning about our focus through presentations at Board meetings, including topics like action research presentations, and through parent workshops designed to keep parents informed about the new math program, *Investigations*, and our new elementary report card. The Board's two strategic questions are posted on our district website and the updated versions were adopted in September 2009. During the present school year we have produced a series of short videos entitled *Classroom Clips* that show the Board question in action in our classrooms in a variety of subjects, K-12. These video clips are introduced at Board meetings and then placed on our district website.

Looking Ahead

We have worked to continually extend the conversation about the Board question to teachers and administrators over the past four years as the work has become more visible and more of the fabric of what we do. As we move forward, we plan to emphasize the following work in an attempt to stretch our thinking.

1. In collaboration with teachers and administrators who are leading the development of our teacher and administrator evaluation process in the Professional Development Advisory Committee, we will continue to define what an active learning environment looks like.
2. We have identified a possible focus next year as assessment literacy, K-12. With teachers who choose this work, we want to construct assessments that measure students' ability to find and solve problems individually and collaboratively. We presently are looking for exemplars to guide us.
3. We have begun a partnership with Chris Dede, Professor of Learning Technology, from Harvard. He presently is researching the use of virtual learning environments in science in our 8th grades and the use of virtual learning assessments in 7th grade. We are eager to get the results of the study and plan to expand our work with Chris next year, possibly to include using mobile devices to create problem-solving learning environments.
4. We have joined a group of eight districts that are developing blended online learning courses. The districts are working under the leadership of Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES and a national curriculum design firm to create exciting, forward-thinking high school electives. Two of our high school teachers will teach a blended course entitled, *Problems of the 21st Century*. This work looks promising in allowing students to pace their learning more flexibly and possibly have more choice in how they are assessed in the future.

Ongoing questions

We continually ask ourselves how we can ensure that all stakeholders are involved and contributing to Chappaqua's mission of ensuring deep thinking for students and staff. We know that some of the most enthusiastic and meaningful work results from our classroom action research project in which teachers focus on questions of practice that are important to them and also relate to the Board question. We are wondering how to allow more opportunities for our teachers and administrators to participate in work like our learning teams, our action research, and our learning symposia. We wonder how to include more educators from outside of Chappaqua, and how to tap the resources of some of our highly skilled community members.

The District has encouraged teachers and administrators to live the Board question as adult learners and has tried to change professional development practices to be consistent with the Board question. We continually grapple with what the next steps might be (beyond satisfaction surveys, observation of practice, and observation of student work) to inform our practice.

Based on Michael Fullan's construct that change in beliefs follows incremental changes in behavior, the District selected only a few components of an active learning environment to emphasize and try over time in classrooms. Those we chose are the basis of the essential questions we are asking our Tri-State visitors to look at with us. We want to know to what extent you see evidence of students':

- generating ideas vs. reporting;
- generating questions, identifying problems, and solving problems;
- making choices and monitoring their own learning;
- engaging in conversations that exhibit accountable talk – students expressing full ideas rather than just phrases or single sentences, building on one another's ideas, respectfully disagreeing, and using evidence to support their ideas.

We also want to know to what extent the system is 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.

We look forward to our Tri-State visitors' ideas, and deeply appreciate the value of extending our learning through your perspectives and investment of time with us.

Summary

We believe this district action research work is still in its infancy. It is our ultimate goal to contribute not only to new practices that will benefit our students in Chappaqua, but to contribute to theory or new ideas or even new knowledge in the field of teaching and learning. We look forward to collaborating with surrounding districts that are grappling with ensuring that students think critically and creatively.

In 2010 McKinsey & Company published a report, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, in which they analyzed 20 school systems around the world. Three findings stood out for us. First, that the focus for improvement in a school system depends on whether or not the school system is moving from poor to fair, fair to good, or good to great. For high-performing districts such as Chappaqua, continual growth ultimately comes down to continual improvement of teaching and learning practices in the classroom. Second, school systems such as Chappaqua should be spending more of their time on improving how instruction is delivered than on changing the content of what is delivered. And third, high-performing districts such as Chappaqua should focus on shaping the teaching profession because we cannot keep doing what we have been doing in order to improve our practices.

I wish we could say we knew of the results of the McKinsey and Company study before focusing on our Board question. Of course, we did not. We did, however, find this study confirming because it speaks to the importance of districts such as Chappaqua focusing on process rather than products to institute meaningful change. Our focus has been on changing instruction in the classroom so that it is more active for students and ensures deep thinking. We are hopeful that this work will be even more meaningful over time.

That is our story to date. We can only imagine the possibilities for students when we are able to provide those environments that will truly foster critical and creative thinking at the highest levels.

Welcome, Tri-State visitors! We look forward to your perspective.

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