



**Tri-State
Consortium**

Chappaqua Central School District

TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2018

Inclusive Special Education

December 5-7, 2018

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Tri-State Consortium

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Executive Summary

The Tri-State Consortium, a professional network of fifty public school districts in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York, advances student performance through a continuous improvement process. Based on a framework of [eight indicators of quality](#), the process involves self-study by member districts and a triennial cycle of review by teams of fellow educators from the Consortium. Serving as colleagues and critical friends, these teams provide Tri-State districts with external feedback about current strengths and promising next steps.

The Chappaqua Central School District has belonged to the Consortium since its inception, and recent visits have focused on student feedback (2015) and critical thinking (2011). This year Superintendent Christine Ackerman and Director of Special Education and Related Services Heidi McCarthy asked the Consortium to focus on inclusive special education. To this end the district formed an eighteen-member steering committee to plan our visit and formulate essential questions for the visit team to consider.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is our inclusive approach to special education having a positive impact on the academic and social/emotional learning of **ALL** students?
2. To what extent do general education and special education faculty share responsibility for the academic instruction and social integration of students with disabilities?
3. To what extent are instructional staff members prepared and supported to work with students of varying levels and abilities within our inclusive educational setting?
4. To what extent do the building based services and supports for struggling learners reinforce the inclusive practices of the district and ensure that all students have the supports necessary for academic success?

Scope of the Visit

This visit, or consultancy, took place over three days in December 2018. The Consortium assembled a twenty-five person team of educators, chaired by Carol Priore (Assistant Superintendent in Mamaroneck) and John Falino (High School Principal in Dobbs Ferry). Once

on site, the team reviewed an extensive array of materials, available through a digital dashboard created especially for the occasion. In addition to logistical information, the dashboard contained links to documents about district planning, special education programs and processes, professional learning, social and emotional learning, state assessment results, assistive technology, RTI (response to intervention), and STEAM programs (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics). Taken together, this collection of resources paints a picture of a school system committed to improvement and innovation on many fronts.

Chappaqua enrolls over 3,700 students in three elementary schools (grades K-4), two middle schools (grades 5-8), and one high school (grades 9-12). To ensure that the Tri-State team understood how inclusive special education operates at each school, the district steering committee organized a complex, detailed schedule of classroom visits and group interviews with students, staff, teachers, and administrators. In addition, the team conducted interviews with the Superintendent’s cabinet, the special education leadership team, the staff development team, representatives of a parent advisory committee, and members of the Board of Education. The Tri-State team divided into small groups to carry out this work.

The visit required complex coordination around transportation, food services, technology support, security coordination, and facilities arrangements. The district managed all of these tasks with great attention to detail and a high degree of responsiveness. While assisted by many, Heidi McCarthy deserves special mention for her extraordinary efforts on our behalf. The district treated the Tri-State team members as valued guests, and we appreciate the many efforts it took to make our visit successful. The team used the upper commons at Seven Bridges Middle School as its home base, and there we enjoyed superb hospitality and excellent food. Above all, we thank the students, staff, and parents who welcomed us in their classrooms, gave up time, and changed their schedules to meet with us. They greeted us with receptiveness, thoughtful comments, and pride in the school district they share.

The System Context

Like all public schools, Chappaqua must navigate a highly-regulated environment. That environment includes federal statutes, state standards and assessments, a tax cap and other funding formulas, and collective bargaining agreements. Of these, special education requirements for placing students in the “least restrictive environment” pertain directly to the Tri-State team’s focus on inclusion.

Chappaqua’s stakeholders expect their schools to go beyond these requirements and minimum standards. Over many years they have built and sustained a culture of excellence. Parents support the schools through active engagement and financial resources. Their children come to school ready to learn and eager to succeed. Teachers and staff members bring a high level of skill and professional dedication to their work. These efforts have produced a forward-looking vision of learning, supported by a \$45 million facilities plan for flexible, technology-rich spaces, a robust program for professional learning and staff development, and an evolving array of performance-based assessments. Chappaqua has also anticipated the future needs of students by launching K-12 programs in technology, STEAM, and social/emotional learning.

Over a decade ago the Chappaqua Board of Education established a dynamic, open-ended approach to long-term planning. Instead of establishing annual small-bore objectives and milestones, the Board adopted two large strategic questions:

- 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?
- How can the District ensure continuing excellence in academic and extracurricular programs while developing a budget that is fiscally responsible?

These questions frame a continuous improvement process: Chappaqua’s aspirations for students are not easily measured and are at the leading edge of educational practice, so it makes sense to try out new ideas, see what happens, and make adjustments accordingly. In addition, the strategic questions suggest a different kind of accountability than New York’s narrowly focused reliance on standard test results, Chappaqua seeks to supplement standard measures with a broader and deeper vision of what student learning should be.

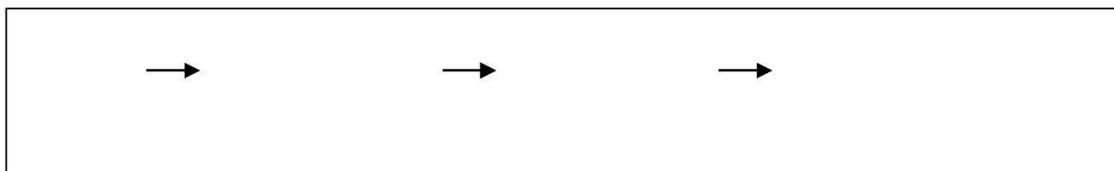
Last year, under the leadership of the Superintendent, a district-wide committee developed a “strategic coherence plan” that spells out that vision in terms of three cognitive skills and three personal attributes that all graduates should possess:

Cognitive Skills	Personal Attributes
Critical and creative thinking	Self-directed, independent
Problem solving	Perseverance
Written and spoken communication	Ethics

This plan provides a potential action framework for a talented, energetic leadership team, many of whom are new to the district. In the central office, the Superintendent and two Assistant Superintendents have served for less than three years. The high school administration is almost entirely new this year. There are also new staff developers and new principals. Used wisely, the strategic coherence plan can help the district leaders come together as a group, reinforce the district’s cherished values, and develop a broad consensus about the opportunities for further improvement.

Overview of Findings: Making Connections

For Chappaqua, inclusion is both an end in itself and a means to higher student performance. As an end in itself, inclusion is a deeply-held belief that defines district culture: “we value all students.” This belief has developed into the structures and systems that constitute different service models at the elementary, middle, and high schools. Next, inclusion implies a set of instructional practices designed to ensure the success of all students in diverse classrooms. Taken together, these elements form a general theory of action: by creating inclusive schools, all students have a sense of belonging. By creating inclusive classrooms, we elevate the quality of teaching. Instructional practices that address diverse learning needs raise the performance levels of all students.



This theory of action connects the dots between belief, program design, classroom practice, and, ultimately, student results. The Tri-State team perceives that Chappaqua has some high impact opportunities to move the district forward along this path, especially with respect to professional development, instructional strategies, and an assessment plan that is aligned with the skills and attributes that the district values. Recommended actions include:

- developing shared language that clearly defines the service models at each school;
- clarifying related roles and expectations for teachers and service providers;
- integrating inclusionary practices into professional learning opportunities;
- developing a comprehensive assessment plan that provides qualitative, formative information about progress toward the vision, including the impact of inclusion;

- developing and communicating a compelling narrative of how the various elements of inclusion advance the district vision for student outcomes.

The essential questions presented by the district focus on impact (EQ #1), shared responsibility for student success (EQ #2), professional learning (EQ #3) and school based procedures and practices (EQ #4). This report addresses each of these issues in turn, not only as separate problems but also as critical and interrelated components of the district’s larger vision. The underlying question might be phrased as “How does the district include ‘inclusion’ as part of its leadership structure, planning processes, and accountability systems?”

Response to Essential Questions

Essential Question #1:

To what extent is our inclusive approach to special education having a positive impact on the academic and social/emotional learning of ALL students?

As a long-held core belief, inclusion shapes the climate at all six schools. Students and teachers exhibit tolerance, caring, and respect. In its interviews and classroom visits the team observed numerous examples of student-to-student kindness. For example, an elementary student recounted a moment at recess: “Even though Justin doesn’t usually play with us, we could tell he wanted a turn on the slide, so we let him.” Teachers, too, reach out to all students in an accepting and supportive manner. A high school student told us, “We don’t even have to raise our hands; the teacher just comes over.” The overall learning environment at each school promotes a sense of belonging for all students regardless of any special need, reflecting inclusion as a core belief. An elementary teacher expressed it this way: “General education celebrates peers with disabilities. We have not one incident of teasing because of disability. I can’t imagine it any other way.”

This description of the school culture at Chappaqua draws from both direct observations and focus group interviews. As such, the evidence is anecdotal and qualitative but nevertheless legitimate and convincing.

The focus group approach suggests a way for the district to monitor the impact of inclusion going forward. By periodically sampling student and teacher perceptions about their experiences in classrooms (as well as clubs and school activities), district leaders can learn what is working well and identify opportunities for improvement. Moreover, by asking students and

teachers what they think, district leaders send a message that they value the voice of students and teachers, and affirm that inclusion is important.

Chappaqua has already taken proactive steps to address school climate issues by launching [RULER](#), a multi-year training program developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Faculty training has been completed at the high school, is underway at the middle schools, and plans are in place to extend training to the elementary schools next year. While not perfectly aligned to the district vision, RULER does offer a structured way to build student capacity for self regulation and understanding. The elementary schools also have building-specific programs for character education and social skills instruction. The focus group approach suggested above offers the district a way to assess the impact of these programs and to see how independence, interdependence, perseverance, and ethics develop across grade levels.

In the same vein, the district would benefit from a broader way to measure academic learning. Chappaqua students continue to perform at high levels on conventional measures of achievement such as state assessments and graduation rates.¹ The Tri-State team saw no evidence that inclusion has affected these levels adversely, and may even have enhanced them. However, these conventional measures do not necessarily capture the cognitive skills and personal attributes articulated in the strategic coherence plan, such as critical thinking, problem solving, perseverance, or the capacity for self-direction. An overall plan to assess these outcomes, including expanding existing performance based assessments, would shed light on the impact of inclusion.

In sum, the Tri-State team concluded that Chappaqua's emphasis on inclusion benefits both classified and regular education students. A useful next step might be to design and carry out formative assessments that enable the district to monitor what elements of inclusion help all students acquire the desired cognitive skills and personal attributes.

Essential Question #2:

To what extent do general education and special education faculty share responsibility for the academic instruction and social integration of students with disabilities?

The district has expressed its core belief in inclusion as a policy framework:

¹ The overall proficiency rate in ELA and mathematics for all Chappaqua students typically doubles the NY State average. The overall proficiency rate for Chappaqua students with disabilities follows the same pattern (or better).

The Chappaqua School District is committed to providing equitable opportunities for students with disabilities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools. To the greatest extent possible, students with disabilities are educated in chronologically age-appropriate general education classes in their home schools and provided with the specialized instruction they require. Within our inclusive model, instruction is developed and provided in a manner that ensures all students have access to the same curriculum within a learning experience appropriate for them.²

This framework has led to specific structures and systems, both formal and informal, that define the way general education teachers, special education teachers, and service providers collaborate and share responsibility for the students they have in common. Collaboration is what makes inclusion possible. One elementary teacher put it this way: “It’s harder to be fully inclusive than having a self-contained class; the team has to develop. It does work – we have kids with ADD who are thriving...You have to be patient with kids on the far end of spectrum, you have to be creative...The team has to work towards that but we feel that we can do that.”

The K-12 faculty typically refers to the collaborative structure as “co-teaching,” but the actual model varies at each level of the district. At the elementary schools, inclusion takes the form of consultant teaching, in which special educators work alongside regular education teachers for two hours a day. In this approach the general education teacher delivers the lesson with support from the special education teacher. At the middle schools, a similar consultant teaching model is in place, but is linked to grade level teams. Special education teachers are present in all core courses every other day for forty minutes, and they supply most of the modifications for students with disabilities. The amount of time for formal collaboration is limited by the master schedule and collective bargaining agreements. At the high school, co-teaching consists of courses that are jointly taught by both a regular education and special education teacher. At all six schools collaborating general education and special education teachers have some common planning time.

The use of “co-teaching” as an umbrella term creates some confusion about roles, responsibilities, and expectations. In particular, that term feeds an assumption by some that co-teaching should occur all day in all classes -- presently, an unsustainable model due to staffing and scheduling. The team heard more than one nostalgic reference to days gone by, when district staffing ratios were more favorable and teaching assistants more numerous. By clarifying definitions and expectations, the district can develop common language that

² [District web page for special education.](#)

facilitates planning and collaboration within schools and -- more importantly -- between schools. Clarity about the features and expectations of each service model can help make sure that transitions are smooth and supports are in place as students move from level to level.

The school community clearly values general/special education collaboration. One parent put it this way: "If both teachers are there at Back to School night and talk the same way, I know my son is going to have a good year." The Tri-State team observed that this collaboration operates unevenly across the district, varying with the particular relationships and the different models. Where collaborative roles were less clear, as at the middle school, some parents worried about "who was the point person" for their child. To some extent, such concerns are related to transitions, when students move from small neighborhood schools to the larger secondary schools with multiple subject area teachers. The district may want to more clearly articulate these roles for parents, staff and students.

Definition of terms and clarification of roles will help strengthen the collaboration between teachers and facilitate effective delivery of services. A shared vocabulary will also enable the district to organize professional development activities that are responsive to the specific, different needs at each level of the system. That takes us to the next essential question.

Essential Question #3:

To what extent are instructional staff members prepared and supported to work with students of varying levels and abilities within our inclusive educational setting?

This essential question ties directly to one of the eight indicators in the Tri-State assessment model:

Indicator #5: Professional Learning, Supervision, and Evaluation

The professional learning plan is based on current student and teacher needs linked to district goals. Professional learning is embedded, collaborative and reflective. The district is attentive to providing the time and resources for this learning to take place. Professional learning is evaluated using a supervision and evaluation process that focuses on efficacy of instruction and attendant growth in student learning.

Chappaqua's teachers and students benefit from a robust, well-defined program of professional learning. Teachers play an active role in shaping their own staff development activities, with

multiple options that encompass not only conference days but on-the-job training. The district offers fellowships in areas such as innovation and technology. These fellowships compensate selected teachers for advanced training, additional time spent, and communication with colleagues. Five full time staff developers provide support throughout the district. Their work involves coaching, assisting teachers new to the district, and sharing specialized knowledge. The current staff development team, relatively new, operates under the leadership of the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and also includes the K-8 literacy director and the director of technology and innovation.

To a considerable extent, the staff development team focuses on district-wide priorities such as literacy, technology, STEAM and social emotional learning. Inclusion is not perceived as a distinct topic for the staff developers. Most special education training, such as the [Wilson language program](#), is sponsored by the special education department rather than the staff development team. This makes sense when you consider that some teachers request more knowledge regarding specific disabilities. Yet, viewed from the perspective of outcomes for all students, the Tri-State team saw the possibility of integrating inclusive practices as a strand within each of the other district priorities. For example, programs designed to promote STEAM would incorporate classroom practices related to inclusion into their work. While the staff development team does not currently operate this way, they expressed receptiveness to such an approach. The idea of integrating inclusion into multiple initiatives makes sense. The staff development team may benefit from a long range plan regarding their work with the staff.

In the effort to focus on instructional practices consistent with co-teaching, school and district leaders identified a need for teachers to understand and distinguish among the [six types of co-teaching](#) -- one teach, one observe; one teach, one assist; parallel teaching, station teaching; alternative teaching; team teaching. While such training might be beneficial for all, the high school is the obvious place to begin because that is where co-teaching exists in its purest form. Teachers at the other schools work together for limited amounts of time and may have additional or more pressing needs, such as gaining knowledge about adaptations for specific disabilities. Staff development plans can respond to the distinct needs of each model.

In addition to formal training, approaches like lesson study, instructional rounds, or learning walks can provide concrete examples of what inclusion looks like in the classroom, and teachers could get valuable feedback from the process. The team also confirmed the need to train and support teacher assistants. Such training would include assistive technology and knowledge of specific disabilities. ("I feel woefully inadequate in many ways. Kids are very different and you can have kids with very different needs.") While the district does offer professional development opportunities for teaching assistants they aren't always offered during their

scheduled work time and therefore not all are able to attend. We also wondered about the potential benefits of offering training around inclusion to other staff members, such as bus drivers, custodians, clerical staff and cafeteria workers.

As the Tri-State indicator states, the supervision and evaluation process should reinforce professional development, and Chappaqua's existing rubric for teacher evaluation touches on inclusion in several ways, especially with reference to differentiation. The Tri-State team saw an opportunity for principals and other evaluators to strengthen inclusionary practices by focusing on teachers not as solo practitioners but as collaborators, i.e., watching them work together as a team. Similarly, observing and coaching teachers in the planning process may add as much value as giving them classroom feedback.

Essential Question #4:

To what extent do the building based services and supports for struggling learners reinforce the inclusive practices of the district and ensure that all students have the supports necessary for academic success?

This essential question connects directly with another Tri-State indicator:

Indicator #6: Equitable Support for Student Needs

Processes and practices are in place in the district that identify and meet students' academic and non-academic needs. These processes are informed by data gathered from a variety of sources and are aligned with learning goals for students at all performance levels. Policies and practices that govern student access to all programs are non-discriminatory and set high expectations that challenge each student. All students have equitable access to all programs.

All schools have tiered intervention processes for identifying and serving students who experience persistent difficulty in the classrooms (Response to Intervention). Those processes include modifications by the classroom teacher prior to bringing in specialists or starting a process of special education classification. These processes differ somewhat across the schools, and the Superintendent has indicated that efforts are needed to reduce inconsistencies across the district.

Most members of the visit team work in districts that use a universal screening tool to identify students with learning needs, and monitor their progress over time. Chappaqua does not use such a tool. Because there are pros and cons, we grappled with whether to recommend the implementation of a universal screener, and ultimately decided that this is a question best left for the leadership team and staff to discuss.

The number of special education students and nature of their disabilities determine the interventions needed at each school, and the Tri-State team saw a mixture of “push in” and “pull out” arrangements. From the perspective of inclusion and equal access to resources, the team noted the following:

- Instruction in social skills is available in two of the three elementary schools;
- Support is more readily available for English Language Arts than for mathematics;
- Academic intervention services are available only before or after school for K-8 students and are not formally offered at the high school;
- By scheduling learning center time at the middle and high schools, students with disabilities may not have access to world languages or classes outside the academic core;
- There is open enrollment in advanced courses at the high school;
- A small number of high school students may need an adaptive physical education course;
- In some specific cases, fidelity to the inclusion model may obscure the need for specialized instruction for the small number of students who need it.

Some of these issues are artifacts of scheduling constraints. Some teachers wanted a larger voice in addressing these issues and determining the mix of services. Others perceived that past budget cuts affected levels of support adversely. The Tri-State team concluded that current staffing resources are sufficient to achieve the goals of inclusion, but they may need to be redeployed or targeted to specific needs as they change from year to year. As a corollary, the team also felt that in certain instances specialized instruction could be undertaken without compromising the goals of inclusion (as, for example, an effort to bring middle school students back to the district). Another way to put this is that the current configuration of services may not meet the unique learning needs of a small number of students.

Conclusion

We have seen how Chappaqua’s positive school climate reflects a core belief in inclusion. Over the years the district has developed structures and systems that translate that belief into a way

of doing business, and each school has established programs and services designed to ensure success for all in inclusive learning environments. Although the district describes its approach as “inclusion” and “co-teaching,” in fact the models take different forms at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. What they have in common is collaboration between general education teachers and special education staff.

The Tri-State team believes that clearer definitions of these models and the associated role relationships would benefit students and teachers alike. By clarifying expectations and creating a common vocabulary, the district could more easily establish greater consistency among schools (to the extent desired) and ensure continuity of support as students make transitions from grade to grade (especially transitions from school to school). Moreover, a shared language would help teachers know what “shared responsibility” looks like at each level of the district. Our thinking is that the district would benefit from engaging the faculty creating common definitions of “inclusion” and “student success.”

Chappaqua’s commitment to inclusion has led to many strong programs and processes. One member of the Tri-State team commented, “It would take my district years to get where Chappaqua is today.” The next level of learning for Chappaqua is to integrate inclusion in its varied forms with other district systems most notably professional learning and assessment. “Now is the moment,” one administrator told us, “to zero in on classroom practices.” In addition to formal training by outside consultants, professional learning could encompass job-embedded practices like learning walks or instructional rounds. The supervision and evaluation process could also strengthen collaborative practices by focusing on teaming when they observe classrooms, or by helping teachers plan together more effectively.

Similarly, in order to gauge the impact of particular collaborative models or particular classroom strategies Chappaqua would be well served by developing a comprehensive, balanced assessment plan that aligns with its vision of student outcomes. In addition to conventional measures, such a plan might select some of its performance-based assessments to serve as checkpoints along the way, verifying what progress has been made and determining what still needs to be done. Formative assessments that gather the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents -- such as surveys and focus groups -- are more likely to shed light on how the various classroom practices affect learning.

It is important to make note of a concern raised by parents, and shared by some faculty members and students with whom we met. While most perceive that the district has successfully focused resources and energy on academic inclusion, social inclusion remains problematic for some students. Parents raised questions about the extent to which the schools

are able to promote greater social inclusion for students who are not well integrated into their peer groups. It is a question worthy of study.

Chappaqua has a powerful story to tell, a story still in the making. Thus far it shows how a fundamental belief in inclusion takes root in school culture, grows, and branches into effective models of collaboration at each school. The story offers many anecdotes, often quite moving, that illustrate how inclusive learning environments benefit all learners, both academically and socially. Yet there are trade-offs, and the work ahead is hard and messy. The leadership challenge is how best to integrate the various collaborative models of inclusion, professional development, classroom practices, and assessments related to the district vision. That is the next chapter, and it falls to district leaders to craft and communicate a compelling narrative that engages students, motivates the faculty, and sustains parent support. The Tri-State team hopes that its efforts have played a helpful role in moving this work forward.