



**Tri-State
Consortium**

Croton-Harmon Schools

Critical Thinking Consultancy

February 26-28, 2020

17 TRI-STATES VISITING TEAM MEMBERS

Administrators

Central Office

Principals

Teachers

Assistant Principals

Department Chairs

Consortium Staff

DIGITAL ARTIFACTS:

Common Definitions

Rubrics

Lesson Plans

Student Work

CLASSROOM VISITS:

CET

PVC

CHHS

FOCUS GROUPS:

Teachers

Students

Administrators

Board Members

CROTON-HARMON SCHEDULE

**“To a large extent,
Croton-Harmon’s
improvement efforts rise
above state mandates”**

**“Instead of emphasizing compliance, the
district has taken a proactive stance, defining
its highest aspirations for students as part of a
larger strategic plan”**

Their initial impressions...

AN EXTENSIVE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE SUPPORTED THIS EFFORT

Central office leaders worked with building administrators and a large group of peer leaders.

Three teachers serve as K-12 Curriculum Fellows.

Each school also has curriculum coordinators representing core subjects (ELA, mathematics, science, social studies, and student services).

The middle and high schools add world languages coordinators to their teams.

Finally, there are four K-12 coordinators for music, art, support services, and health/PE.

Although they have full teaching loads, coordinators meet monthly with their building administrators, both as individuals and as a group.

They also participate in summer planning for professional development.

These peer leaders served as the prime mechanism for communication, feedback, and revision during the “iterative process” of developing common definitions. One curriculum coordinator described the process this way:

When we first started we all had our separate ideas. It was a heated process. We went away and we came back. We went away and we came back. Developing the associated rubrics and their specific performance expectations proved equally complex, involving extensive professional development, time, and support. The process “pushed us to articulate what we were looking for.” Indeed, the process itself increased awareness and ownership of the district vision -- perhaps even more valuable than the rubrics produced.

Teachers use the rubrics as they see fit, drawing upon or adapting particular elements to fit a lesson. Some use rubrics as a planning guide; some use them to help students understand what is expected; some use them for assessment. But ALL teachers participated (or had the chance to) in the effort to find common language connecting instructional practice to larger purpose.

The focus of our consultancy:

TRI-STATE INDICATOR:

Shared Vision and Environment
for Change

TRI-STATE INDICATOR:

Professional Learning,
Supervision and Evaluation

TRI-STATE INDICATOR:

Curriculum and Instruction

CROTON-HARMON'S ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

To what extent do we have a
common understanding of what is
meant by “critical
thinking through
problem-solving?”

CROTON-HARMON'S ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

To what extent has the district
provided professional
development opportunities that
prepare teachers to create
problem-based learning
experiences that promote critical
thinking?

CROTON-HARMON'S ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

To what extent do students have
opportunities to engage in
critical thinking through
problem-solving in all disciplines
and at all levels, K-12?

TRI-STATE INDICATOR: Shared Vision and Environment for Change

CROTON-HARMON ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

To what extent do we have a common understanding of what is meant by “critical thinking through problem-solving?”



EQ1: To what extent do we have a common understanding of what is meant by “critical thinking through problem-solving?”

findings:

The district has an extensive structure of teacher leadership to guide its improvement efforts. This structure ensures that the voice of teachers is part of the process and helps build teacher commitment to the district vision.

Written definitions exist for critical thinking, metacognition, presentation, and creative/thinking innovation. The definitions were developed through an iterative, collaborative process with teachers, curriculum coordinators, fellows, and administrators.

The District provided time and support for the development of associated rubrics. Evidence of common understanding and implementation of critical thinking activities exist in many classrooms across the district.

The common definitions and rubrics serve as key resources for teachers, but the district acknowledges that there are multiple ways to implement the vision, with variations appropriate for different student levels of readiness and different content areas. This flexibility has created a positive environment for change.

EQ1: To what extent do we have a common understanding of what is meant by “critical thinking through problem-solving?”

recommendations:

The district has built a robust framework for its overall vision. Despite these significant strengths, the next level of work for Croton-Harmon presents a number of challenges. Critical thinking exists in many quarters of the course of study, but links to problem-solving are less well developed. The district is poised to move forward on this front.

The problem-solving dimension suggests it is not enough to think clearly; students also need to apply their knowledge and analytic skills to real-world issues. Such issues typically cut across disciplines and have multiple solutions, all of which have trade-offs. While the team observed some examples of problem-solving imbedded in the curriculum (as when students analyzing *Lord of the Flies* were asked to make connections to the collapse of other civilizations), Croton-Harmon is at the early stages of providing such learning activities across the board.

TRI-STATE INDICATOR:

Professional Learning, Supervision and Evaluation

CROTON-HARMON ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

To what extent has the district provided professional development opportunities that prepare teachers to create problem-based learning experiences that promote critical thinking?



EQ2: To what extent has the district provided professional development opportunities that prepare teachers to create problem-based learning experiences that promote critical thinking?

findings:

The district professional development program has numerous strengths, including:

Curriculum Coordinators, Fellows, and interested teachers have participated in extensive critical thinking orientation and professional development.

The peer leadership structure of curriculum coordinators and fellows has provided embedded, ongoing support for teachers.

Wednesday meetings provide time to advance the work through collaborative planning, presentations, and reflection.

LATIC and STEM training has advanced problem-based learning in all schools.

Learning walks at each school have provided administrators and teachers with insights about how critical thinking occurs in classrooms.

The culture of self-initiated professional growth ensures that teacher voice is integral to professional learning and has created a positive environment for change.

The district has participated in a partnership with Haldane, North Salem, and Pleasantville for the purpose of sharing ideas and collaborative planning.

EQ2: To what extent has the district provided professional development opportunities that prepare teachers to create problem-based learning experiences that promote critical thinking?

recommendations:

- Shifting the focus from critical thinking to problem-solving, or, put another way, shifting the focus from approach to classroom implementation. Such a shift might entail support from a different set of consultants.
- Using the rigor/relevance framework as a resource for developing a common definition of problem-solving.
- Establishing regular opportunities and a protocol for looking at student work through the lens of the rubrics.
- Establishing regular opportunities for teacher focus groups as a way of identifying and sharing successful practices related to critical thinking and problem-solving
- Expanding opportunities for collaboration and reflection within and across schools.
- Providing regular opportunities for building administrators to share successful practices that reinforce the work, including how best to use the supervision and evaluation process.
- Strengthening the feedback loop between student results and planning for professional development.

TRI-STATE INDICATOR: Curriculum and Instruction

CROTON-HARMON ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

To what extent do students have opportunities to engage in critical thinking through problem-solving in all disciplines and at all levels, K-12?



EQ3: To what extent do students have opportunities to engage in critical thinking through problem-solving in all disciplines and at all levels, K-12?

findings:

Each school has created physical spaces that are conducive to collaboration, design/innovation, and the use of technology, such as the “Indie Lab.

The master schedule accommodates longer blocks of time for extended inquiry.

The elementary and middle schools have designed and implemented a standards-based report card; thus, feedback about student performance matches the critical thinking and problem-solving skills valued by the district.

The district sponsors numerous co-curricular activities where students can apply their knowledge and skills to real-world problems.

EQ3: To what extent do students have opportunities to engage in critical thinking through problem-solving in all disciplines and at all levels, K-12?

findings:

CET

Library-based STEM experiences and the emerging Science 21 program have explicit elements of critical thinking

PVC

Fast Efficient Baseline Assessments (FEBAs) sharpen the focus on student performance. The 8th-grade CHANGE Project stands as the centerpiece of the district's efforts to integrate content across disciplines, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

CHHS

Critical thinking projects exist within each subject; for example, there are strong research sequences in English and social studies that ask students to engage in reasoned discourse and analysis. These projects also ask students to make connections between classroom content and present-day issues.

EQ3: To what extent do students have opportunities to engage in critical thinking through problem-solving in all disciplines and at all levels, K-12?

analysis

While it is clear that elements of critical thinking and problem-solving are valued, the materials reviewed and the classrooms visited indicate there is wide variation in practice. High levels of student engagement and positive classroom culture pervade all three schools; this is a remarkable and significant accomplishment that should serve as a source of pride for all. However, critical thinking and problem-solving are not always explicit and not always central to Instruction.

To some extent this is intentional. The faculty values flexibility in approach, and district leaders have honored that value. As mentioned above, the shared vision has produced a framework and related rubrics that serve as resources rather than a mandate. As a result, teachers use common definitions and rubrics in various ways, differing in purpose and scope. With respect to purpose, some use the rubrics as a planning tool, some as a way to help students know what is expected, and some as a culminating assessment. With respect to scope, “critical thinking” can range from a single lesson activity to the structure of a long-term project. There is ample evidence that teachers value critical thinking. One consideration for further growth is to think about how explicit the District would like this work to be. Critical thinking as an explicit aspect of instructional planning, lesson design, classroom instruction, assessment, and reflection would look different from an expectation that this work should naturally occur, embedded into what it is that “we already do”. Students, teachers, and administrators could benefit from the clarity of articulated expectations.

conclusion

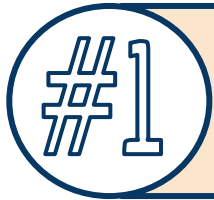
The Tri-State team identified many exemplary curriculum experiences across the schools. Some of the programs where critical thinking and problem-solving skills were most evident include the following:

- the CHANGE project at the middle school
- K-8 STEM experiences
- the Peer Mediation program
- the CHOOSE project at the high school
- the art program's focus on critique
- the high school advisory program (CHAP)
- the elementary mathematics cycle for enrichment and reinforcement.



recommended transitions

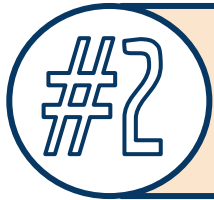
As Croton-Harmon determines what steps will best advance its vision for students, three transitions come to mind...



recommended transitions

shift from vision to implementation.

Thus far, the district has moved in a deliberately organic fashion, giving teachers a lot of latitude in how (and how much) they incorporate critical thinking into their classrooms. The district may wish to get more explicit in this endeavor so that teachers clarify how the definitions and rubrics are used not only in unit design and assessment but also in daily practice. By “saying what they do and doing what they say,” teachers can help students themselves articulate what they are learning and make connections across disciplines. When their critical thinking strategies are explicit, teachers may find it easier not only to share successful practices but also to reinforce and amplify each other’s work. Finally, school leaders may also be able to expand implementation by making critical thinking a more formal part of the supervision and evaluation process. With more deliberate use of the definitions, rubrics, and pedagogy, the district will expand its collective efficacy, and the work will become more systemic.



recommended transitions

shift from implementation to results.

As district leaders grapple with the question, “How will you know the impact of this work?” they will consider multiple forms of assessment -- formal and informal, quantitative and qualitative, formative and summative. However, they may not wish to rush into a comprehensive assessment plan, preferring instead to experiment with what kinds of student performance data and evidence are helpful. Yet, as the work takes hold and becomes more a part of daily practice, the district will want to understand where they are making progress and what curriculum adjustments are needed. As the strategic coherence plan notes, “Measure what you value, value what you measure.” This will entail determining where and how to verify what students know and are able to do. As suggested above, one fruitful line of inquiry may involve the rich qualitative information that comes from student (and teacher) focus groups.



recommended transitions

shifts in knowledge and skill that future students will bring, and the curriculum needed to address the new skills and experiences that future students will bring

Just as the introduction of a new FLES program requires adjustments in the middle school world languages, so will the high school need to adjust to the rapidly expanding exposure of young students to STEM experiences and the design process. Similarly, the high school may wish to consider how the freshman course of study could build on the high levels of engagement and depth of inquiry offered by the CHANGE project in grade 8.



this year's focus...

- **Manage the new challenges of hybrid and remote instruction**
- **Infuse successful past practice into this year's learning models**
- **Share results of this report with teachers at the building level**
- **Consider how our new approach to planning instruction through Learning Arcs can be invaluable in meeting Tri-State recommendations**

