



**Tri-State
Consortium**

Croton-Harmon School District

TRI-STATE VISIT 2024

Vision & Mission: What Croton-Harmon Schools Can Be

February 28 – March 1, 2024

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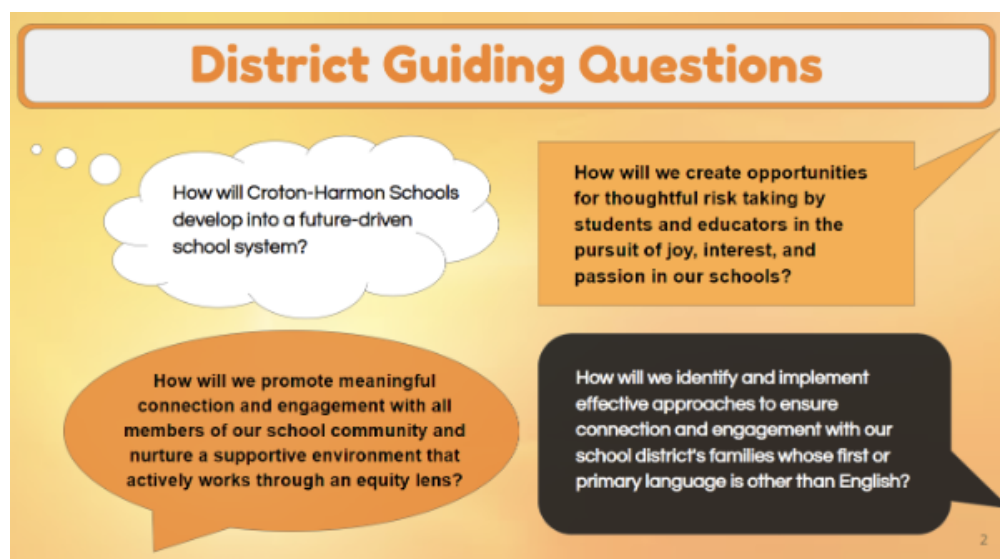
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Executive Summary

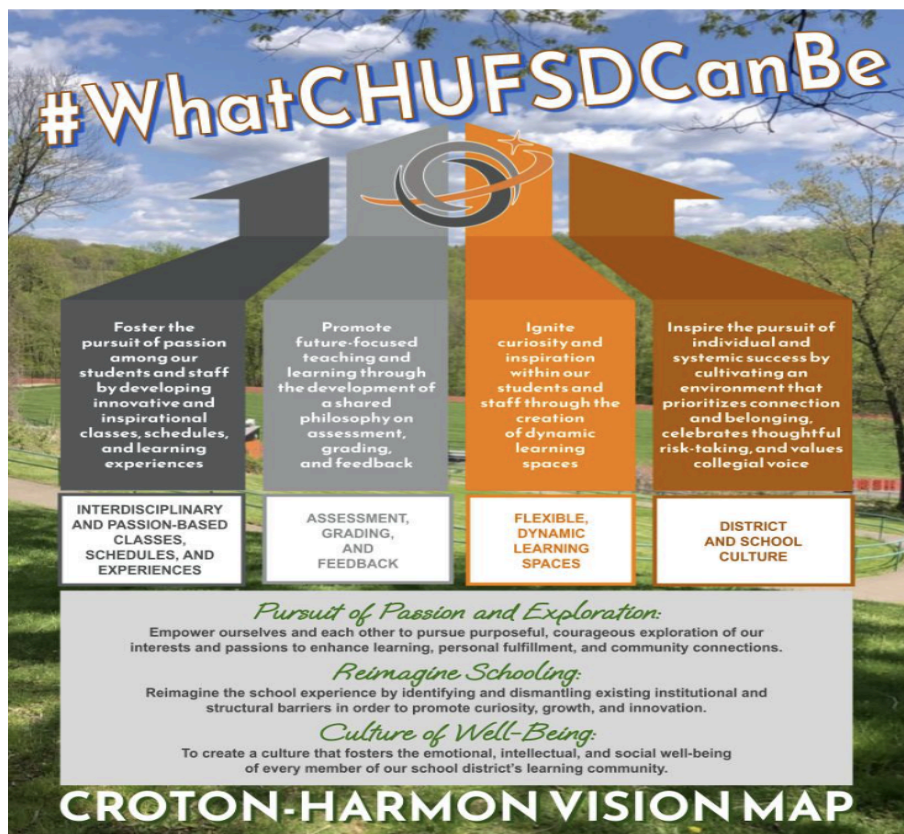
The Tri-State Consortium, a professional network of **sixty** public school districts in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York, advances student performance through a continuous improvement process. Based on a framework of eight quality indicators, the process involves a self-study by member districts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

The Tri-State team spent three days on February 28, February 29, and March 1, 2024, in the district. The Consortium team, which consisted of fifteen teachers, administrators, and Tri-State staff members, listened to presentations by key stakeholders who were involved in disseminating information and supporting the community in understanding and in beginning to implement the Croton-Harmon Vision Map. In addition to this, students, parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the Board of Education were interviewed. Some of the visit team members toured schools and viewed innovative teaching spaces.

We were welcomed by Mr. Stephen Walker, Superintendent of Schools and Mr. John Griffiths, Assistant Superintendent, who introduced their team. It was noted both here and throughout the visit, that in considering what, “school can be,” Croton Harmon (CH) was building on its rich history of embracing change and innovation. As Mr. Walker stated, “We are standing on the shoulders of giants.” The majority of the morning was spent sharing the strategic planning that resulted in the Vision Map, and in becoming familiar with its content. The process began by considering four critical guiding questions that represent a logical and compelling bridge from the past to the present and into the future:



The strategic planning team included administrators, students, Board of Education trustees, families, and members of the community. The culmination of their work is the Vision Map, an intentionally aspirational guiding document, that aims to reimagine and to energize the system:



The map celebrates inclusivity. As Mr. Walker noted, “We want everyone to see themselves in it. We want everyone to identify as dreamers and doers.” And, in order to create a safe environment where risk-taking becomes embedded in the ethos of the district, there are no metrics, timelines, or names attached to it. The intention here is to create coherency system-wide, enabling stakeholders to find their place in a future that is intentionally undefined. Connecting to and operationalizing the work requires significant trust in what the map represents, and a willingness to work collaboratively to turn aspirations into real and sustained change.

Mr. Griffiths shared CH’s rich history and spoke of the pride that the community takes in its schools. Croton-Harmon has been characterized as a, “progressive,” place. As a result, the parents the Consortium team spoke to are happy with the district’s reputation for being innovative and future-focused. The district serves 1,525 students. The student population is predominantly White (70%). Latino students comprise the next largest enrollment group (18%).

Asian, African-American, and Multi-racial children collectively represent the remaining 12%. 13% of their students are considered economically disadvantaged, 2% are English Language Learners (ELL) and 14% are identified as Students with Disabilities (SWD). There is a concern, as noted by a Board of Education (BOE) member, that families whose home language is not English may need direct support in both understanding and recognizing that they have a role in the realization of the Vision Map. For many of them, it may represent a significant departure from their held understandings about the structure of schooling.

The opening meeting provided the Consortium team opportunities to unpack the map. This gave a foundational context for the consideration of CH's Essential Questions and the indicators that were to be used as lenses for each:

- **Essential Question 1**

To what degree is our vision map understood and supported by our community?

Indicator #7 Shared Vision and Environment for Change – Internal Support

Shared vision and goals focused on student performance have been developed with the staff and community, are well articulated, clearly communicated, consistently pursued throughout the district and school community, and include student voice. This vision expects, supports, and recognizes risk-taking, creativity, and innovation as components of change toward continuous improvement. There is a process to review student and teacher work and learn from experimentation.

- **Essential Question 2**

To what degree do our professional learning systems advance the work of the Vision Map

Indicator #5: Professional Learning, Supervision, and Evaluation

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

The district provided the Essential Questions and indicators in advance of our visit. The questions provided the schema for the team's study. These questions are answered separately and inclusively and serve as the format for the Annenberg Consultancy protocol that we facilitated on the third day of the visit. The responses to these questions are in the next section

of this report, and they are meant to assist Croton-Harmon to continue to write its evolving story.

Response to Essential Questions

Essential Question #1

To what degree is our vision map understood and supported by our community?

Communication with key stakeholders has been central in the dissemination of the Vision Map. Essential to this is ensuring that all groups are represented and all voices are heard. Every district employee and every community member is an integral part of reimagining CH's future. Everyone has a role in the writing of the district's story of what school can be.

Some of the teachers that the Consortium spoke to had participated in the strategic planning process. They shared that it began by acknowledging the work done in the past that provided the strong foundation necessary to support the next phase in the district's evolution. They noted that, in moving from the established Profile of a Graduate to the creation of a more expansive definition of future-focused learning, "the whole district, not just the kids, can see ourselves as life-long learners. We were no longer putting things in silos. We were thinking about what we all need to be able to do this work." Other teachers noted that they "live and breathe," the Vision Map, although some of its resulting pedagogical shifts, like interdisciplinary learning, is a new concept for many of them. They are happy with the notion of, "no boundaries, no walls," which allows them to have more open and honest conversations with colleagues and administration. They believe that many of their colleagues are invested. There is little negative feedback, although there is concern about the children's ability to navigate the changes. New teachers feel well-informed and very supported. One shared, "I feel like I have always been here." Another said, "I feel like a kennel puppy that was adopted into a nice home." Secondary school aides appreciated the level of collaboration that has been taking place in the schools. They feel valued and appreciate being involved in conversations about processes and structures, like scheduling. One shared, "the culture here is very inviting."

Some teachers the Consortium spoke with cautioned that although there is a great deal of support for the map, there are some considerations that may need to be addressed. They know that this work is in its infancy, but they are unclear on where it may be going. The changes that the map is bringing, as one teacher stated, "takes some getting used to. It is less of a detailed step-by-step and more of a forest map with lots of trails. That is exciting for a lot of us, but some

of us are afraid of getting lost.” Overall, the sentiment among faculty is appreciation. They feel heard and valued, and are appreciative to have had agency and voice in the process.

High school students, as noted earlier, were involved in the strategic planning process and, in general, have had the most interaction with the Vision Map. The students who the Consortium team spoke with noted that they had varying familiarity with it. While one student noted, “I think it was put together as a committee and I think it has something to do with school,” others had more explicit understandings. One shared, “I think the high school looks really exciting for the incoming ninth graders. I think that a lot of teachers are encouraging other pathways. You don’t have to have a corporate job or go to college. I have heard a lot about BOCES and our tech center.” They believe that there are many ways to be successful in school. They have noticed the changes being made to the playing fields and to the music rooms. They feel that they are receiving more information about what is going on in their buildings. One student said, “You see the school is going in a positive direction. It feels like we are more involved in making decisions. We are being asked how to make things better.” They were unsure about what middle school and elementary students know about the Vision Map. Some teachers at Pierre Van Cortlandt Middle School (PVC) believe that some of the children may know that school is changing, but attribute that to curricular innovations like the Passion Project. Learners at the Carrie E. Tompkins Elementary School (CET) cannot access the language of the map. This is a developmental challenge. One teacher noted, “They see things are different. They can tell you about the animals (support dogs and chickens in the library), but they do not connect this to a district vision.”

Administrators have championed the Vision Map and have seen significant shifts in the culture of their buildings. They have encouraged and supported teacher collaboration. At CET, they have given assigned time back to the faculty to allow them to work with their peers during their contractual day. They are confident that teachers know, “what is on the horizon.” At PVC they discuss the map or some aspect of it at every meeting. “It always comes up,” shared one leader. Providing the space for teachers to operationalize the vision by repurposing faculty and curriculum meetings has been impactful. Leaders acknowledge that, “if you are asking more from your staff, you must be willing to give something back.” Administrators find joy in supporting teacher innovation. All leadership teams noted that they “love never having to say no. It empowers us all to have the freedom to take a risk, to experiment, to follow our passions.” They believe strongly that teachers who are fulfilled and happy will be more engaged in their work. The removal of accountability measures, particularly in the APPR process, was “liberating.” There is strong consensus that the shift from a high-stakes observation and evaluation process to teacher-led collegial, supportive conversations about pedagogy and student learning has spurred innovation and risk-taking. One administrator said, “If you want

people to innovate, you need to give them the tools to do so. One way to do that is to remove the obstacles that create fear and discourage creativity.”

One challenge to the implementation of the Vision Map is financial. There are budgeting and facilities considerations that require a thoughtful approach to spending. Budget lines have been put in place to fund Passion Projects and to reimagine learning spaces. However, it is not enough to meet all needs. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) has provided grant money for classroom renovations and curriculum projects. The BOE has been supportive in considering budgeting options. The Assistant Superintendent for Business and the Director of Facilities have looked at a variety of ways to cut operating costs in order to provide monies to support the vision. It is their responsibility to, “operationalize the Vision Map.” In doing so, they find that they have to consider what systems need to be put in place to, for example, more closely monitor purchasing. They have also worked with school leaders to better understand the budget process and consider how to adjust spending to meet their innovation needs. They are concerned about having to, “say no, now that people are used to hearing yes.”

Members of the Board of Education are particularly energized by the creation of the Vision Map. In 2022, the district welcomed Stephen Walker as its new Superintendent of Schools. They were looking for someone who understood and honored their past and a leader who could partner with the community as the journey continued. They feel that the collaborative nature of the strategic planning process supported a general buy-in for the Vision Map. They feel that all stakeholders are energized, and that this level of investment will result in better teaching, increased student engagement, and better outcomes. The BOE has not received any significant community pushback. They believe that the “feel of the schools is different and happier.” Communication between the district and its families has been creative, and as a result, has been successful in introducing and explaining the vision to most of the community. The Superintendent’s videos are praised for their brevity and their effectiveness. They provide necessary information in a lively, engaging format. The BOE believes that while the community is excited about the district’s work, they do not want to lose some of the more established school practices, particularly those that relate to grades and college admissions. The BOE is working to clarify that the Vision Map is, as one trustee stated, “...additive. It is not dumbing down what the children are getting.” And, in order to ensure that they are successfully reaching underrepresented community groups, they have hired a Community Liaison who will engage in active and creative outreach.

Families have widely varying knowledge and experience with the Vision Map. Those who served on the strategic planning committee are well-versed in its goals and pillars. The PTA had a brainstorming session with Stephen Walker that enabled them to engage in a guided

unpacking of the map. They described the various forums (PTA, BOE, facilities planning, and school-based meetings) where it has been presented. In them, the PTA has actively worked with families to elicit feedback, to address misconceptions, and to answer questions on it and its impact on the schools. Although outreach has been wide-ranging and frequent, there is a concern that not everyone is being reached and that different channels need to be used to engage all. They hope that the newly hired Community Liaison will have innovative strategies to ensure that families understand the district's evolving direction. High school parents echoed similar sentiments. They commend the district leadership on the launch of the Vision Map. One noted that their, "vision and enthusiasm trickles down and has a positive impact...the weekly videos have helped with effective communication throughout the district." They acknowledge that while communication is widespread, it is likely that some families may not have or be able to access information when it is available. And here again, they are hopeful that the Community Liaison will be effective in addressing this issue.

CH has two communication specialists to support leadership in narrating the district's vision. They ensure that, as they shared, "the right message is sent at the right time." They work closely with staff to help them develop a common language to describe both the map and the changes that will result from its implementation. They manage the district's social media. They vetted the, "what school should be," tagline. They feel very fortunate that the Superintendent is comfortable on camera. They believe his "brand is in sync with the district. You can't help but believe in him and his vision. You want to embrace and trust him. People hear his message over and over again. That builds trust." There is an established timeline that underpins their efforts. They are currently working on getting the message out about the interdisciplinary classes at the high school. They ensure that the staff sees all communication prior to a release to the wider community. They are looking to involve teachers and students in sharing how their practice and the school experience are changing as a result of the Vision Map.

In order to support Croton-Harmon in measuring the extent to which the community understands and supports the Vision Map, the Consortium team offers the following recommendations and commendations:

Commendations

- A wide range of stakeholders have been involved in the development and dissemination of the Vision Map. This has resulted in a strong level of buy-in across the district.
- Teachers believe that the Vision Map is integral to the future of the district. Their collective belief in the lasting impact of this work has ensured that most stakeholders are invested in its success.

- There is a great deal of respect across stakeholder groups. There is a sense of genuine care and joy that permeates the schools.
- District and building leadership actively live the vision. They hold themselves accountable for their expectations. They are continually modeling, “what school can be.”
- Teachers have a great deal of autonomy. They are encouraged to pursue and to share their passions. They feel that they can ask for what they need and to have their voices heard. They confidently take risks knowing that it is safe to do so, and that they have the support of their colleagues and their administrators.
- Collaboration has begun to become a district norm. Stakeholders believe that collaboration positively impacts student outcomes.
- Faculty who are creating interdisciplinary courses are given the necessary resources and planning time.
- The New Teacher Academy has done outstanding work with recently hired faculty. It ensures that all first and second-year teachers have a deep understanding of the processes and pedagogies that are foundational to the Vision Map. New staff understand its expectations and can speak with confidence about its pillars.
- There is some budget flexibility that provides the necessary resources to operationalize the Vision Map. The need to make certain that monies are available to support innovation has become a district priority.
- There is built-in collaboration time across the district. Assigned time has been given back to faculty in order to provide the opportunity for collegial planning and conversations.
- The hiring of the Community Liaison will work to ensure that underrepresented groups understand the Vision Map and its impact on the student experience.

Recommendations

- To date, the story of Croton-Harmon’s reimagining what school can be has been told primarily through the thoughts and perceptions of school leaders and other adult stakeholders. While it has, as noted above, been effective, there is concern that underrepresented groups may not fully understand the scope of work and the changes that have begun to happen in the school. In order to enrich and extend these efforts, consider the role students may have in the narration of the story. Think how powerful it would be for the children to share their lived school experience with the community. Consider how including the perspective of all students, even the district’s youngest learners, can serve to add depth and joy in illustrating the impact of this very significant change. Think about how garnering student input and supporting them to craft their stories can allow the district to measure how they are responding to these large shifts.

Also consider how families will respond when they hear their children sharing what they see, feel, know, understand, and are able to do. The impact has the potential to be very powerful and extremely welcoming, allowing everyone to see their place in Croton-Harmon's vision.

- Some children across the middle school shared that the Passion Project felt like, “just another assignment and another thing.” They feel significant pressure to identify a passion and are uncertain about how to plan a project to showcase their work. Some said that it was, at times, difficult to find the support they needed to move forward. And, there was a concern on how to pursue a passion over several years of middle school without the work feeling stale and repetitive. Consider thinking about the project on a continuum, and identifying the skills and strategies necessary for children to sustain interest over time. It is challenging for young learners to find meaning in what they do without the tools they need. This can result in stressors that can lead to anxiety and feelings of uncertainty. Think about how direct instruction in how to conduct research, in design thinking, and in creating and delivering presentations will both serve children in sharing their passions and prepare them for higher-level learning. Consider using existing programs, such as Science Research, as models for a rethinking of the Passion Project. As you do, think about the developmental needs of students at different grade levels. And look for opportunities where students can collaborate with peers to offer authentic and meaningful support. Inclusivity is a CH value. Understanding that open-ending learning works for many, but not all is integral for the success of the project. It makes certain that there are entry points and pathways for all. Consider Identifying exemplars that can give form to the project's aspirations and that can guide students in imagining what is possible.
- While administrators know the goals of each, some middle school students struggle to understand the differences between the Passion and the Change Projects, and are wondering why they are asked to do both. Consider creating focus groups of children to unpack the goals of each. This will allow for greater clarity in the goals and objectives of each. These groups can also serve to generate ideas on how the two projects may be combined or how they can be made more distinctive. Wonder with the students on how to increase engagement. Often, those who are doing the work have unique perspectives on its purpose. And, the inclusion of student voice will send a message of respect and provide a sense of agency that may be empowering.
- Consider how the Community Liaison can add cultural relevance in her outreach to underrepresented committees. Think about strategies to gather multiple perspectives on what schooling has been for newcomers, for families of students who are not neurotypical and for those who cannot always access information received from the schools. Consider how the needs and values of some may be different from those of the

larger community. And then think of how they can be represented in ways that add depth and richness to the vision.

- The Vision Map is a thorough, yet complex representation of the district's reimagining of school. It is challenging for younger learners to access and to understand it. Consider strategies that can communicate CH's aspirations to elementary and early middle school students. Think about the possibility of creating a simpler, more accessible version of the Vision Map. Consider how the use of visuals and illustrations can support this rendering. Also, think how children can be involved in creating a document that reflects their developmental needs.

Essential Question #2

To what degree do our professional learning systems advance the work of the Vision Map?

The Vision Map is supported by four pillars that enable CH to make their aspirations actionable. The impact of professional learning (PL) and the consideration of how it has advanced the work of the map can be explicitly viewed by gauging how each pillar has impacted the district's vision of what school can be. By connecting each pillar to changes that have taken place since the inception of the map, CH can better measure the effect of its PL approach on culture and well-being, curriculum, instruction, hiring, facilities, and budgeting. As noted in the introduction to this report, the four pillars and their attendant impact are as follows:

- *Interdisciplinary and Passion-based Classes, Schedules, and Experiences*
Foster the pursuit and passion among our students and staff by developing innovative and inspirational classes, schedules, and learning experiences.
- *Assessment, Grading, and Feedback*
Promote future-focused teaching and learning through the development of a shared philosophy on assessment, grading, and feedback.
- *Flexible, Dynamic, Learning Spaces*
Ignite curiosity within our students and staff through the creation of dynamic learning spaces.
- *District and School Culture*
Inspire the pursuit of individual and systemic success by cultivating an environment that prioritizes connection and belonging, celebrates thoughtful risk-taking, and values collegial voice.

While many of the innovations and processes that have been put in place reflect values across multiple pillars, an attempt is made to draw a through-line between PL and the area of the map where its influence is most represented.

Interdisciplinary and Passion-based Classes, Schedules, and Experiences

When considering the professional learning needed to realize CH's vision of what school can be, district administrators intentionally designed experiences that were organic, that were led by the faculty, and that supported innovation by championing thoughtful risk-taking. District and building leadership continue to actively create the conditions that allow for change and that will provoke future-focused thinking. This process was modeled by the Innovation Team which consists of the Director of Technology and Innovation, members of the administration and faculty, students, and, "good thinkers from the community." Using a protocol, they unpacked innovative ideas and issues. They also considered their implications and influences on the schools and key stakeholders. Mr. Walker noted that the inclusion of a wide range of voices made it challenging for the team to meet. As a result, it is being restructured to work more closely with individual schools. District leaders have incorporated some professional learning around the Vision Map in their administrative meetings and BOE retreats. In addition, Judith Wilson has been hired to provide 1:1 leadership coaching to help building administrators to lead and operationalize the map.

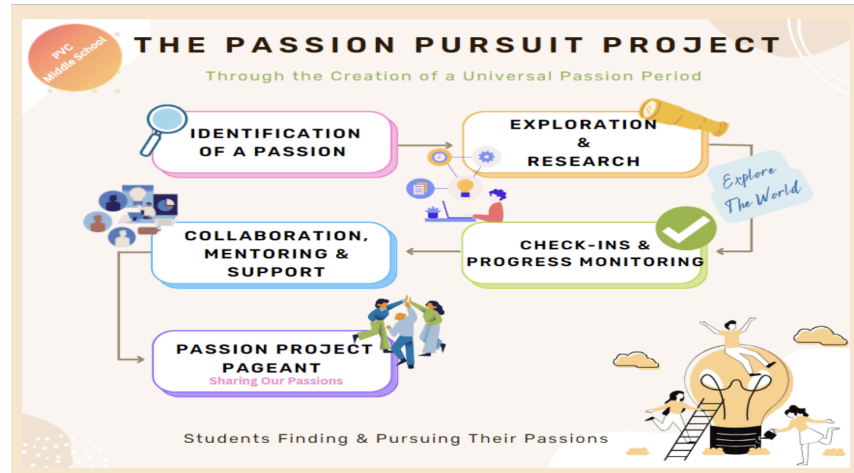
Instructional coaches at CET and Croton-Harmon High School (CHHS) are assigned to both teach and coach (.5/.5). This is strategic. This structure fosters the belief that faculty view coaches as peers with a deep understanding of the challenges of classroom teaching. As one coach shared, "a lot of teachers feel that if you are not in the classroom then how can you help me?" It also enables the coaches to use their classes as a laboratory, providing a safe environment for faculty to learn new pedagogies. Coaches do not rely on a particular model to structure their work. They have collaborated to design a research-based process that they believe best aligns with the district's vision. Both their own professional learning (they attend collegial circles with regional coaches) and the support they provide their colleagues is, "...very self-directive. Teacher's passions and needs drive how we work and what we focus on. We are a familiar face who is here to help." Although relatively new to their roles their impact on teaching, learning, and culture has been immediate. They have supported teachers in their personal passion projects. They created the, "Chat and Chew," a structure that brings small groups together to collaborate in learning, for example, a new technology like Canva, or to discuss classroom-based issues. Coaches also co-teach and model lessons. They seek peer partnerships through continual check-ins with colleagues and with offers of support. One coach said, "We started by drumming up business by being around and helpful. Then we let word of mouth help to drum up more." They have worked with (especially at CET) a significant majority of teachers. They believe that this organic process makes the coaching experience more meaningful and impactful.

The district began its work in fostering passion with its staff during the 2022-2023 school year. District and building leadership, in one of their rare instances where a specific directive had been issued, asked all teachers to identify a passion, and to pursue and share it with their colleagues. Teachers interviewed by the Consortium team were universally enthusiastic about the initiative. One shared, “It was nice and so refreshing, to come to work and have fun!” To identify their passions and to plan their work, staff were posed four guiding questions:

- What is your passion?
- Why do you care about this topic/focus?
- What do you need to make it happen?
- What goals will you pursue through your passion project?

The results reflected a wide range of interests. It is notable that many of the projects had a direct impact on teaching and learning. These include: night school, artificial Intelligence, STEAM experiences, and instrumental skills (music). In an example of how work in one pillar supports the goals of another, the Corridor of Courage, the introduction of service dogs, and wellness, meditation, and mindfulness projects contributed to the creation and maintenance of a culture of well-being. The district’s message of inclusivity perhaps is most strikingly represented by student excursions created by the CH bus drivers. They designed a series of field trips to introduce children to places in and near the district that highlighted the beauty and the history of the community. And for underrepresented groups, the Conversation Hour for the parents of English Language Learners (ELL) provided an opportunity for families to better understand their children’s school experience.

This year, PVC launched the Passion Period. One period within the school’s six-day cycle was set aside for children to pursue their passions. The structure of this reflects the district’s support for experimentation as a driver of innovation. Teachers did not receive targeted professional learning prior to the period’s launch. And, in some cases, the work did not go as planned. However, as one teacher noted, “that is okay because the district supports us to take risks and we do not have to worry about anyone judging us on how we did. It is amazing after the pandemic to bring joy back into teaching and not have to worry about results.” PVC has a defined process for this work:



There are teachers assigned to the Passion Period to provide a measure of student assistance. Children do the majority of the work on the projects independently at home. Grade 8 students will present their finished projects first, a strategic decision made in order to provide models for their peers. Like the teachers, the range of projects are diverse. One student is using art to address climate change, another is composing a piece for the school orchestra, and one child is working in the area of cardiology and physiology. Students enjoy, as one student shared, “the creative freedom this stuff gives me.”

While most teachers and many children find the work worthwhile there are some areas of concern. Faculty find that one period in the cycle can be insufficient to provide assistance to students. The teachers are not certain what their final product should look like and, as a result, find it challenging to help the children envision what their presentations can be. The eighth graders understand that the project is intended to develop their agency and self-management skills, but shared that younger students have a, “much harder time doing what they need to do by themselves.” And some children view it as, “just another thing I have to do. It’s more interesting and fun if you already know your passion. It is not great when you don’t.” Several did not understand how it was different from the eighth-grade Change Project.

Opportunities to work across content areas occur at CET and at CHHS. The Innovative Teaching Across the Disciplines (ITAD) program at the elementary school is a collaboration among special area teachers as well as between them and classroom teachers. It was created as a response to the move to a six-day schedule at CET which left room in their schedule to innovate. The teachers did not receive any formal professional learning to support the creation of ITAD, although both felt that working together influenced their pedagogies. They worked with every fourth-grade class and planned a school-wide hoedown. They are concerned that ITAD may be unsustainable and that monies needed to fund their work may not be there in the future. There

is a belief that the, “vision has not caught up with the budget.” There is also a concern that students may not be receiving an adequate amount of physical and music education.

Several Interdisciplinary courses are in the process of being created at the high school. This reflects the first stage of a three-year plan. During the current school year, the idea is to, “develop courses, concentrations, and collaborations.” Two goals that are foundational to this work are to make certain that students receive core credit upon course completion and that teachers engage in a “true” collaboration. Interdisciplinary courses currently in development include:

- United States History/English 11. In order to ensure equity there will also be a version of this course for students in self-contained classrooms.
- Connections (Humanities 9) will be a project-based course that combines English and history.
- Bioethics consider ethical questions through the reading of contemporary fiction.
- Algebra 1/Physical Science enables students to learn mathematics through a science lens.

Teachers engaged in some professional learning in course construction, including a presentation from the instructional coaches. They have also been given planning time, both in the school year and over the summer. High school leaders have been the primary drivers of this work, offering through the Interdisciplinary Exchange, opportunities for teachers to come together to brainstorm possibilities, to generate excitement and energy, and to have questions and concerns addressed.

In addition to interdisciplinary courses, there are collaborative teaching opportunities at CHHS in computer science and Science Research. They are offered through the dual enrollment programs at Westchester Community College and the State University of New York-Albany. In addition, at PVC there is a health collaboration. At CET teachers work together in English as a New Language classes. Computer science teachers were inspired to co-create a Computer Science Fair by visiting a neighboring high school. Faculty believes that administrators are extremely supportive of their desire to work together. They feel they are given whatever they need to be successful. They are grateful to have that level of commitment from their leaders. They noted that, “knowing we can do what we want ignites passion in us.” While many teachers have not had professional learning in how to collaborate, they have become excited about new programs and instructional strategies through classes at institutions like BOCES. They also look to their colleagues for support. One ENL teacher shared, “We are part of a community. When we need help, we ask for it. When others want feedback, we give it.”

Assessment, Grading, and Feedback

Assessment, grading, and feedback practices are varied across the district and tend to primarily rely on observing students at work and on gathering anecdotal evidence. Some teachers told the Consortium team that they are comfortable with allowing learning to unfold and in using student interactions to guide their instructional decision-making. They garner important information about learning by asking questions and noting instances of student engagement. And while students take the New York State Assessments in Grades 3-8, and the Regents, Advanced Placement, and college entrance examinations at the high school, the information it provides about student performance is deemphasized. Work has started to identify processes to measure student growth that reflect the aspirations of the Vision Map. PVC has been at the forefront of these endeavors by creating a standards-based report card with supporting rubrics. The rubrics clarify expectations and allow for their alignment across disciplines and grades. They feel that the feedback they are providing to students and their families, “is more honest.” CET has also begun the process of creating a standards-based reporting tool. At the high school, Science Research has moved to standards-based grading and teachers have begun to revise their grading practices in AP Biology. They took a summer course to prepare them to make these changes. One noted that while, “students appreciate knowing where they struggle. I get the most push-back from high achievers because they can’t hide behind the rote memorization of facts. They might not get an A+ on all standards.”

Flexible, Dynamic, Learning Spaces

The Future Facilities Project includes an extensive redesign of learning and common spaces across the district. It aims to build dynamic and vibrant structures that can be used in multiple and creative ways. It illustrates the long-term commitment of the district to reimagine and to sustain the vision of what school can be. Highlights of this plan include:

- The renovation of the CET library to allow for ease of collaboration, and the repurposing of the kindergarten courtyard to be used as an amphitheater for communal learning and gatherings.
- The Teacher Hub and Conference Center at PVC that invites faculty to learn, work, and informally gather together.
- The Flex/PPS Suite at the middle and high schools will have furniture and spaces that support the individual needs of learners who are not neurotypical.
- The CHHS cafeteria will provide a visually vibrant and welcoming place designed to maximize the ability of students to socialize in groups or to comfortably spend time on their own.
- The Innovative Learning Center at the high school will have a range of multi-purpose areas designed to be arranged according to need.

There are currently classrooms in each building that have received new furniture that aligns with aspirations of the Vision Map. Some have been funded by the district and some through grants made available through the PTA. The high school has a large flexible instructional space that students and teachers use to work in collaborative groups. There has been no formal professional learning on how to use these spaces. Faculty are encouraged to explore and find the configurations that best meet their learning objectives. At the elementary school, all classrooms are designed for both collaborative and independent work. In spaces that do not have new furniture, teachers have created large and small group areas, arranged desks that enable students to talk and work with each other and added decorative touches to add vibrancy and color to their spaces.

District and School Culture

It is the belief of CH leadership that culture is positively impacted when trust is established. District leaders note that, “We are not looking for traditional accountability. Professional learning is an open invitation for everyone.” The vast majority of faculty that the Consortium interviewed and those who we met in buildings expressed how happy they were at CH. Many described it as, “teacher heaven,” and a place where, “the answer is always yes.” There is a pervasive sense that CH is a safe place, and that district and building leadership are easy to talk to and very responsive to need. One teacher said, “It is a culture of yes...and. They will give you everything you need to follow your passions, but there needs to be purpose to what you want to do. That is great. It should be like that. We are here for the kids, after all.”

The district ensures that this culture, and the commitment to the Vision Map it supports, is reflected in hiring. The selection process is explicitly designed to identify candidates who either naturally or through their experience embody CH’s values and aspirations. The video that potential hires are asked to create directs them to explore and make explicit connections to the Vision Map. And, prior to being sent to a committee for an interview, candidates are asked to co-plan a demonstration lesson with coaches. The intent here is to determine, “how well someone can collaborate. It is more important at this stage than pedagogy. We can teach them that. But, being able to work productively with others is one of those things that you either have or you don’t.” As noted earlier in this report, the district is looking for, “dreamers and doers.”

CH has a comprehensive and innovative approach to onboarding new hires. The New Teacher Academy, led by Jennifer Rescigno and Erica Camilo, is a structure that provides, “embedded professional development opportunities for all new faculty to learn about, understand and contribute to the district vision and goals through collaboration.” They believe that, “New faculty must have ownership in the vision. They need to be empowered to accomplish it. If

there is one investment we should make, it is in the newest members of our team.” The Academy began in the 2022-2023 school year. Currently, first and second-year teachers engage in structures that hone their ability to engage in collegial thinking, planning, and dialogue:



New Teacher Collaboration

- Collaboration starts immediately upon hire
- Teacher to Teacher Collaboration
 - ◆ Establish PLCs (professional learning communities)
 - ◆ Provide a supportive network
 - ◆ Intervisitation opportunities
 - ◆ Lesson study
 - Student to student & school to community collaboration built-in
- Teacher & Student Collaboration
 - ◆ Student shadowing
- Reflective practices & opportunities are provided throughout the year

The work done at the academy is differentiated. With a second cohort in place, it has been necessary to consider how deliverables may differ according to experience. Teachers in the program describe it as, “really fun and interactive. I have never had any real kind of new teacher training before. I feel so lucky to be here. I feel like everyone wants me to be successful. This is the first time new teacher training has felt purposeful.” In addition to collaboration, a significant amount of time is spent on unpacking thoughtful risk-taking. One teacher laughed and said, “It has been hammered into us since Day 1. But it is exciting. I am taking a risk by reimagining grading.” New teachers have an extensive amount of professional learning available to them both within and outside the academy. “If I find something and I want to go, they’ll usually fund it,” stated one participant. Several of the new teachers interviewed spoke to how the academy has enabled them to feel warmly welcomed and very well prepared to work in the district. A sampling of their comments about the academy’s impact include:

- “I was blown away by the well-organized mentorship and the sense of authenticity it gave me.”
- “I felt totally prepared to start collaborating and communicating with parents.”
- “The academy helped me figure out how to contribute to the overall culture of the school.”
- “The training I got felt totally organic. I always feel that my thoughts are heard and welcomed.”
- “Within days I felt that there was no way that I could fail.”
- “I feel my thoughts are valued and aligned with the district.”

The efforts made to enculturate and educate new teachers have made the academy a powerful driver of innovation and acclimation. The level of buy-in and consensus around its work is evidenced in the voices who are engaged in it.

The culture of well-being includes a variety of resources to support the social and emotional health of the community. School counselors have been working to foster a sense of safety and inclusivity across the schools. They have considered strategies for what this work looks like, how resources like the flexible support space can be effectively used, and how to develop a common, inclusive language to use with staff and students. They have had the opportunity to study the Vision Map and have had discussions about planning across the grade levels. They are considering, “trying some of it,” in the next school year. They have had professional learning in cultural responsiveness, suicide prevention, and to gain greater familiarity in delivering a multi-tiered system of support. One counselor shared, “We are sent to things that we may be interested in going to, and everything is getting approved. That is new this year.” The guidance team is working on creating programs to address student and staff mental health. They have particularly welcomed opportunities to support children in the Passion Project. It has given them time to engage in collaborative planning and to experiment with using new spaces.

There has been a change in curriculum used to teach social-emotional learning (SEL) skills. They have used the shifts engendered by the Vision Map, “to build a counseling program from the ground up.” They look to tailor their work to the needs of students. In second grade, for example, they created a unit on self-awareness, and they moved from using the Second Step to the Little Spot program to develop student facility in emotional regulation. Using the lesson study professional learning option in the district’s Annual Personal Performance Review (APPR) variance, the counselors have learned the components of Little Spot, have planned and taught lessons, and have considered how to gather evidence to assess its effectiveness.

The APPR variance awarded to CH has enabled faculty to have increased agency in both the observation and evaluation process, and in their professional learning. Emphasis on the Danielson Rubric as a measure of teacher effectiveness has shifted. It no longer drives conversations about teaching and learning. Instead, it serves as a “values guide,” helping to unpack language around pedagogical skills and strategies. Prior to the granting of the variance, teacher observation was seen as something that was “done to people. It was not seen as professional learning.” There are still pre and post observation conferences, but their focus has shifted from, as one administrator noted, from “assigning numbers and labels to collegial, supportive conversations that ask teachers, how can I help?” Faculty has one announced observation. There is a menu of four options: action research, lesson study, peer observation, or an unannounced administrative observation to complete APPR requirements. The plan differs

slightly for tenured and probationary teachers, but reflects the belief of the district that, “the existing (original) teacher evaluation model does not prioritize **teacher empowerment and passion-based learning** and we believe that this variance incorporates a balance of the existing APPR plan while **prioritizing teacher choice and voice** that has a direct impact on the student experience and student outcomes.” Each of the new options comes with a suggested process to guide the work and deliverables to measure its impact.

Middle and high school health teachers collaborate with one another. They have looked at the Vision Map, and while they have not received targeted formal professional learning around it, they are hopeful that it will contribute to staff wellness. They have begun to plan and facilitate activities that are aligned with the map that included a yoga event with students that piqued the interest of teachers who observed it. The department has adopted wellness practices, such as, “walk and talk,” meetings. The PVC teachers are interested in developing broader collaborations, but the current schedule does not yet allow for that. They have enthusiastically embraced the Passion Projects. They believe that it provides agency that results in, as one teacher said, “no longer having to have things assigned to me. I have the freedom to do what I want and to choose projects that are important to me and my students.”

As Croton-Harmon looks to measure the degree that their professional learning systems advance the Vision Map, the Consortium team offers the following commendations and recommendations for their consideration:

Commendations

- The district seeks to identify and use experts within the system to further their work. This reflects their belief that embedded professional learning yields investment and trust in the system.
- The New Teacher Academy is extremely effective and highly responsive to the range of experience of its participants. It is a differentiated and personalized model. It is a multi-year cohort that includes all first and second year teachers. Participants speak to the tremendous impact the program has had on their ability to understand and actively participate in the culture of CH.
- Instructional coaches have a part-time teaching load. This allows them to use their classrooms as laboratories. It also engenders trust among the faculty they support. Their colleagues believe that coaches have a deep understanding of the challenges they face in their work with students.
- All staff are supported and empowered to personalize their professional learning. They have a great deal of agency in selecting what they want to attend and who they want to

collaborate with. There is a sense that the district will find a way to support their development.

- District and building administrators model the Vision Map in their work and relationships with teachers. They believe that they cannot ask anyone to do something that they are not willing to do, or to try something that they are not prepared to try.
- Intervisitations are supported and actively encouraged. The district believes that strong models and the opportunities to learn from others are drivers of innovation.
- There is a culture of learning and growing in Croton-Harmon. There is a shared sense of responsibility in the creation of a community of, “doers and dreamers.”
- The APPR variance received by the district demonstrates to faculty that CH is serious about promoting growth through collaboration. The waiver actively incorporates teacher choice and voice in the observation and evaluation process.
- There are a variety of structures that support teacher collaboration. ITAD and interdisciplinary courses enable faculty to work with and learn from each other.
- The staff and middle school Passion Projects are strong examples of efforts to operationalize the Vision Map. They encourage agency and innovation across the district. They allow the community to share in work that brings joy to others. The Passion Projects have created important structures and programs that further the aspirations of the Vision Map. Many of them, like the use of support animals and the Conversation Hour for families of ELLs, are directly tied to the creation of an inclusive culture of well-being. They have also given voice and agency to non-pedagogical staff who feel that are actively included and well-represented in the district’s commitment to, “every member of our learning community.”
- The language staff uses in speaking about their work is intimately tied to the Vision Map and is consistent across the district.
- PVC has created standard-based report cards with supporting rubrics. There is standards-based grading in Science Research at CHHS. CET has begun this process and will be looking to make explicit ties between what they are assessing with the aspirations set out in the Vision Map. By doing so, they have made explicit, tangible ties between assessment and future-focused learning. These tools will allow teachers to measure the impact of their innovations, and will allow families and children to see the connection between the map and their learning experiences. The hiring process has been changed to ensure that newcomers are a good fit for the district.

Recommendations

- Croton-Harmon has embarked on ambitious, ground-breaking work. As your aspirations begin to be realized, it may be important to consider how to monitor the impact of professional learning systems and how they have begun to shape the work the district

has started. Consider thinking first how the reimagination of school has affected teaching and learning. Consider strategies that will enable CH to measure the map's impact on student growth, the change to teacher pedagogies, and the effectiveness of new structures such as coaching, interdisciplinary courses and classroom-based collaborations.

- The district has begun to engage in future-focused assessment, grading, and feedback processes. To move this work forward, consider how the creation of a shared philosophy around these components may serve to operationalize and systematize the Vision Map. Consider how to narrate this work through a lens of continuous improvement. Think how the use of an “if/then” model (for example, “**if** teachers want students to (identify a skill and strategy), **then** students will (identify an outcome or a process) may allow explicit ties to be made between the map's aspirations to actionable, embedded, formative assessment practices. Consider what will constitute the district's look-fors, and the strategies that may be used to gather and disseminate the information they provide. Also, think of how the demonstration of student learning can be reimagined to engage students and their families in the process.
- Aligned student outcomes ensure that instruction moves across grades and schools in developmentally appropriate and accessible ways. It provides students with the skills and strategies that are the foundations for new and increasingly complex learning. Consider defining the common outcomes that can serve as curriculum benchmarks. Think about who is best positioned to monitor alignment of this both within and across schools.
- The New Teacher Academy is the jewel in Croton-Harmon's professional learning crown. Consider and reflect on how this structure can be replicated, extended, and maximized to support veteran faculty. Consider strategies for all teachers to engage in collaboration across the district.
- Consider strategies for reimagining the library as an innovation hub. How might this add depth and student support to the project? Consider what professional learning is necessary to make this happen.

Conclusion

One final note...teacher autonomy has been firmly established. As noted throughout this report, the faculty strongly feel that they have been heard and honored throughout the change process. They believe they have a level of control and autonomy around their work. This can be built upon to lay a strong foundation for a comprehensive implementation of the next phase of the district's journey. Consider the need, as noted earlier, to establish common student outcomes across content areas. Common and well articulated learning goals and instructional

objectives may be identified through collaborative processes. Structures, such as protocols, can be used to ensure that all ideas, questions, and concerns are raised, and that all voices are heard. For a comprehensive list of protocols that can be used in a wide range of contexts, go to <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/>. Teachers exercise agency in how they teach into these common learning goals and student outcomes. Accountability is an important driver in creating and sustaining change. Without it, it is challenging to measure the system's response to its ambitious work. Consider how the asking of thoughtful and reflective questions can enable CH to create data-driven processes to continue to operationalize the Vision Map.

- How does CH assess what students know, understand, and are able to do?
- What are the types of data that can be collected that best align with the district's values?
- How has the Vision Map changed teaching and learning?
- How is the district measuring individual student growth?
- How does the consideration of growth over time impact the alignment of curricular goals and objectives? Who will be leading this work?
- What processes are in place to allow teachers to collaboratively reflect on students' response to instruction?
- What impact might total teacher autonomy over what they teach have on student learning?

During our three days in the district, the Consortium team engaged in presentations and discussions around its Vision Map and the professional learning that is in place to support its implementation. We met with faculty members, directors, liaisons, administrators, students, parents, parent organizations, and Board of Education members. Every one of our needs were met by the excellent staff members who planned the visit.

A special thanks goes to everyone in Croton-Harmon who made this visit incredibly easy and very enjoyable. But, we would be amiss if we didn't single out the district and building leaders who went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that we wanted for nothing, that we got to our various commitments on time, and that we saw through their proud and loving eyes what a special place CH is.

The work done in Croton-Harmon is innovative, and looks to establish a new and more sustainable vision of what school can be. The district has a strong approach in place and we hope that this report can support them when planning their implementation journey. We see the district as poised to turn their aspirations into a reality that will be the model of innovation that may inspire others. You have successfully identified the people, the structures, and resources you need to take that giant leap into the future. And as you do, others will watch in

awe.

Croton-Harmon is a joyful place. This does not happen by accident. You have created a context that has resulted in a great deal of excitement, and a strong sense that the future can and will reflect all that is possible when a community has trust as a core value. Continue to dream. Continue to do. The past is prologue. The future is yours for the taking.