



**Tri-State
Consortium**

**North Salem Central School District
TRI-STATE VISIT 2024**

Curriculum and Instructional Practices Connected to Profile 5th and 12th Grade

March 13 - 15, 2024

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Executive Summary

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

The North Salem Central School District is highly regarded locally and regionally by every measure. As a long-time member of the Tri-State Consortium, the District has welcomed Tri-States to review several programs and initiatives over the years. The Consortium values its relationship with the North Salem Public Schools and appreciates the opportunity to engage with the District to learn more about the ***“Curriculum and Instructional Practices Connected to the Profile of a North Salem 5th Grader and Profile of a North Salem Graduate”*** and to bring forward a visiting team with a wide range of experiences from across the region.

The North Salem Central School District is a K-12 public school district serving students from Westchester and Putnam Counties and families in North Salem, Southeast, Somers, and Carmel. The District currently serves 963 students in grades K-12. The middle school/high school enrolls 511 students, and Pequenakonck Elementary enrolls 452 students. About 19% of students in the district receive Special Education services, 3% receive ENL support, and 19% are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. Demographic data reported for students in the District is as follows: Black 2%, Hispanic 21%, Asian 2%, White 71%, and Multiracial 4%. The district's graduation rate is 99%.

The North Salem School Central School District invited the visiting team to evaluate the District’s ***“Curriculum and Instructional Practices Connected to the Profile of a North Salem 5th Grader and Profile of a North Salem Graduate.”*** Superintendent, Dr. Duncan Wilson; Director of

Instruction and Human Resources, Dr. Julio Vazquez; Deputy Superintendent Dr. Adam VanDerStuyf, administrators, and teachers welcomed the team. The visiting team considered three key indicators:

- Indicator 2 Student Metacognition
- Indicator 5 Professional Development
- Indicator 7 Shared Vision and Goals

The team was also asked to consider the following questions:

- *To what extent are we connected to North Salem Best Practices of a North Salem 5th Grader and Profile of a North Salem Graduate?*
- *In what ways and to what extent are teachers' curricular and instructional practices aligned to North Salem Best Practices and Profiles?*
- *In what ways and to what extent are teachers provided with professional learning opportunities that support them as they provide learning opportunities for their students to engage with the North Salem Best Practices/Profiles?*
- *In what ways and to what extent is leadership aligned to support the North Salem Best Practices and Profiles?*
- *In what ways and to what extent are families and the community aware of and engaged with the District's Mission/Best Practices/Profiles?*

The team spent three days in the district, on March 13-15, 2024, engaging with multiple presentations, examining district documents and interviewing administrators, teachers, students, parents, and Board of Education members. On the third day, the Tri-States team facilitated a consultancy conversation between team members and district representatives, attended by Board of Education members, administrators, students, teachers, and support staff from across the District. The visit concluded with a debriefing meeting between the co-leaders of the visiting team and the District Superintendent and Director of Instruction and Human Resources. There was consensus that the visit had yielded powerful experiences for all involved

and that early feedback as a result of the closing fishbowl activity was already under consideration.

Indicators and Essential Questions

Indicator 2 - Student Metacognition

- ***In what ways and to what extent are students assessed on achievement of the indicators/components of the North Salem Best Practices/Profiles?***

There are many opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. This is evident across the district - across grade levels, content areas, in the projects that students produce, and in the activities in which they are engaged. Reflection is also evident among teachers as they think about their teaching and their professional learning. However, metacognition involves “thinking about your thinking,” which takes reflection to a deeper level. The District is poised to move students from reflecting on their work to reflecting on their thinking.

Students shared interesting feedback about the ways that they are assessed. They can articulate that they experience changes in the instructional practices of some of their teachers, yet assessment remains mostly traditional grading methods. The visiting team found the feedback from businesses and professionals who have engaged with North Salem students as part of their internships to be especially powerful commentary and is an example of an alternative assessment that the District might want to consider in other areas. It speaks to the strength of the Profile of a Graduate and seems to be exactly the kind of feedback that would be of interest. The final presentations for the OPTIONS Program also provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned metacognitively.

The focus on Thinking Routines is more evident in the elementary school than in the middle or high school, and language related to wondering and thinking is also apparent in the elementary classrooms more overtly. Members of the visiting team observed a high school English class where students were involved in deep thinking about a novel they were reading. Artifacts in many folders from the high school teachers show evidence of students routinely involved in reflective thinking. The Seal of Civic Readiness also provides opportunities for students to move through the six stages and gain "insight into themselves and their learning styles to help guide choices for next projects." In the OPTIONS Program, students work on weekly reflections of their experiences and present their work to juniors. Focus questions are based on the Profile of a Graduate and the District's Mission.

Commendations

- There was evidence that students engage in metacognition in some courses at the High School and in some of their clubs.
- There was some evidence of some teachers making metacognition part of their unit/lesson design.
- There is a template for unit/lesson design that includes planning for metacognition.
- At the elementary level, there was evidence that Visible Thinking activities incorporate metacognition.
- At the elementary school, some classes use "See, Think, Wonder," and "I used to think, and Now I think" to engage students in metacognition.
- The final presentation of the senior internship engages seniors in some metacognition.

Recommendations

- Have OPTIONS students share their experiences and their learning with freshmen and sophomores, not just juniors, so they can begin to understand, value, and think about their own internships.

- Work with staff to shift from engaging students in reflection to metacognition, thinking about their thinking.
- Find ways to engage teachers in metacognition regarding their own learning as a way to model metacognition.

Indicator 5 - Professional Development

- ***In what ways and to what extent are teachers provided with professional development opportunities that support them as they provide learning opportunities for their students to engage with the North Salem Best Practices Profile?***

There is a strong emphasis on professional development in North Salem. With the six mission-based best practices, there is a lot to learn, and it is essential to help teachers and other support staff prioritize and focus their efforts. Teachers and support staff value professional learning, yet there needs to be more consistency among departments regarding how certain practices are aligned in their content areas. This disconnect is particularly evident in the work on computational thinking. A recent survey of teachers was designed to assess their progress and capacity with computational thinking, and the results of this survey should give district administration a relevant lens through which to analyze teacher understanding of computational thinking, the impact professional development has had on teacher understanding, and progress made toward implementing computational thinking into their curriculum and instructional practices. There are challenges related to confusion and lack of understanding of how computational thinking is supposed to “translate” among grade levels and departments.

The Director of Instruction and Human Resources has created, developed, and shared multiple professional learning modules to assist staff with professional learning expectations. These kinds of support are available to all teachers. Some staff shared that the presentations, emails,

and technology-based support are overwhelming to many who have not yet had any previous specific and targeted in-person training. Some building-based administrators also shared that they no longer have a role in choosing and developing professional learning for their staff. A “top-down” approach to professional development was a fairly common theme. Teachers and coaches also shared that they need departmental professional learning opportunities in order to embed computational thinking into their curriculum and practices. Each teacher has a personalized professional learning plan, but many teachers do not feel they have a voice in what they are learning. Internal focus groups with teachers and staff would yield important feedback for district administration regarding what teachers feel and what time and experiences they think they need to move this work forward.

Professional development within the counseling department has been focused on social and emotional learning (SEL), and counselors feel they have been given the time to do the work that connects to their department the most. They see the connections between their focus on Social and Emotional Learning, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, and mental health with the Profile of a Graduate, specifically in communication, collaboration, and citizenship. Still, counselors note that these are organic connections used in “natural conversations” with students.

Commendations

- There is evidence of a strong culture of professional development in the district.
- Instructional coaches are in place in some areas.
- The Learning Principles are highlighted with new teachers during new teacher onboarding.
- There was evidence of several professional development opportunities and resources available to teachers via video presentations.
- Paraprofessionals are involved in some professional development.
- Highly qualified outside consultants have assisted the District with professional learning on topics such as Habits of Mind.

- Counseling and Special Services staff feel supported with their professional learning and have a voice and choice.
- Financial support and time were given over the summer for the development of the 5th-grade capstone project.

Recommendations

- Give teachers more choice and voice in professional development and time to engage with each other to share best practices.
- Consider providing more teacher training to implement the district's initiatives in specific content areas.
- Reflect on what worked so well with the Habits of Mind implementation and use it as a model for implementing the mission-based best practices.
- Help teachers connect to the learning principles and practices/profiles and their *own* instructional practices.
- Consider leveraging in-house teachers and staff who have elevated professional knowledge in specific practices. Give them time and support to assist their colleagues.
- Find ways for teachers to collaborate and plan with these in-house resources.
- Form focus groups with teachers to gather their input and feedback.
- Consider more ways to incorporate mission and vision initiatives into district hiring practices.

Indicator 7 - Shared Vision and Goals

- ***In what ways and to what extent are teachers' curricular and instructional practices aligned to North Salem Best Practices and the Profiles?***
- ***In what ways and to what extent are students assessed on achievement of the indicators/components of the North Salem Best Practices/Profiles?***

- ***In what ways and to what extent is leadership aligned to support the North Salem Best Practices and Profiles?***
- ***In what ways and to what extent are families and the community aware of and engaged with the District’s Mission/Best Practices/Profiles?***

North Salem has a strong culture and climate rooted in a long-standing belief in the importance of shared mission and goals. In speaking with almost anyone, from teachers, administrators, and Board of Education members, there is reference to and adherence to this sense of shared mission. Despite this historical rooting in a shared mission, there is a consistent message among these same stakeholders that there are currently too many initiatives and that this is causing a dilution of the understanding of the shared mission in the district. However, it is important to note that despite this sense of “mission creep,” most stakeholders believe strongly in the district's mission, support it, and feel a part of it each day in their work. Foundational work such as Habits of Mind is an important example of how early mission work was well implemented and internalized, and it is still manifest among students and staff. The Habits of Mind deployment in North Salem is quite remarkable. The co-leaders of the visit made sure to contact with the developer of Habits of Mind following the visit to share how impressive this work is in North Salem.

District administrators are clearly invested and aligned with the mission and vision of the District as evidenced by the oversight of the professional learning for all staff across the District. Although some staff expressed some frustration over what they believe is a top-down approach to professional development, it is important to note that this is more than likely due to the administrative commitment to the practices and mission and their strong desire to move the district forward. The Director of Instruction and Human Resources has been a central and strong carrier of the mission and practices and has been deeply involved in making connections between the six mission practices for staff - sharing videos and resources to help create understanding. This allows teachers to continuously go back and relisten to deepen their

understanding. The videos also provide many resources for the teachers that support their work.

Shared mission and goals always need to be communicated and celebrated. The District has many committees, meetings with parents, and community partnerships where a focus on the mission can be consistently communicated to create greater understanding and deployment among stakeholder groups.

Commendations

- There is strong evidence of a shared mission.
- There is substantial evidence that the shared mission is understood and that buy-in exists.
- There is a common understanding of the Profile of a 5th Grader.
- There is a common understanding of the Profile of a Graduate.
- The elementary School has a monthly focus on each of the learning principles enabling staff and students to build a common and deep understanding of what they mean.
- The OPTIONS course and Seal of Civic Readiness are aligned with the Profile of a Graduate.
- Students know the Habits of Mind well and can speak to them easily and authentically.
- Some rubrics are used to help students assess their growth in the learning principles.
- SEL work at the elementary school is well-defined and implemented
- Some parents have an understanding of the learning principles
- The learning principles are included in building-level communications, and parents are aware of them.
- Professional development time is allocated and scheduled.

Recommendations

- Think about ways to engage parents to deepen their understanding and provide clarity of the learning principles and the profiles - Grade 5 and Grade 12.
- Consider ways to involve students in the elements of the capstone projects before they actually engage in them in grades 5 and 12.
- Use well-attended events more strategically to communicate the District's work as effectively and as often as possible—for example, student presentations at Board of Education meetings and better use of the website as an archive for student work and experiences.
- Communication needs to be clear about the expectations for the learning practices. Consider ways to communicate teacher expectations regarding the learning practices more clearly and effectively.
- Hold focus groups with teachers to gather more feedback and insights about how the focus on computational thinking is going.
- Clarify the “why” of computational thinking for teachers.
- Consider the alignment between assessment, the profile, and feedback mechanisms. High school students are looking for feedback on their growth in the learning principles.
- Consider ways to reflect some of the elements of the profile and learning principles on the report card at the middle and high school.
- Consider the misalignment between the focus on the learning practices and how students are presently being assessed, what they get feedback on, and how.

Conclusion

The visiting team is exceptionally grateful for the district's warm welcome and attention to detail during the visit. The schedule was well-planned and allowed for thoughtful and extended interactions with stakeholders, including members of the BOE, administrators, counselors,

teachers, students, and parents. The artifacts and documents provided to the visiting team were most helpful, and we thank all those who worked to pull so much of this vital information together for our review. The District has experienced a change in leadership with a new superintendent and the visiting team was impressed with his knowledge and commitment to forward progress in the District. The Director of Instruction and Human Resources has done an enormous amount of work in North Salem to solidify and operationalize the priorities and mission of the District. His longevity in North Salem is stabilizing and provides a supportive throughline for teachers, administrators, and staff.

The District is to be commended for its willingness to open itself up to feedback about important aspects of the instructional program that are not necessarily easily measured. The fact that they are not easily measured does not belie their importance to students' success in school and beyond. The learning principles are critical for students to know and practice to be successful in any endeavor. The Habits of Mind are central to high-functioning, mentally stable students and humans in general. The pervasiveness with which these practices are embedded in the culture at North Salem is particularly noteworthy. The District may want to consider a hard look at issues related to coherence since the research-based best practices in place are strong instructional priorities yet there seems to be an overarching theme of “lack of coherence” when engaging with staff about the learning practices.

Lastly, the visiting team was most impressed with the students we met formally and informally. They are by far the best advocates for what is happening in the North Salem schools. The visiting team found them to be thinking deeply, focused on their relationships with others, engaged with the school and community, and, quite frankly, funny, interesting, confident, poised, and able to “hold their own” in a variety of circumstances and endeavors. Student success is always the greatest testament to collective school efforts and North Salem has much to celebrate.