



**Tri-State
Consortium**

Princeton Public Schools

TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2025

Visual & Performing Arts

November 12 – 14, 2025



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District Visit Personnel and Information

Brian Lotze

Teacher
Blind Brook
Blind Brook High School
840 King Street, Rye Brook, NY 10573
914-937-3600 x4337
blotze@blindbrook.org

Donald Whitman

Teacher
Blind Brook
Blind Brook Middle School
840 King Street, Rye Brook, NY 10573
914-937-3600 x4338
dwhitman@blindbrook.org

Casey Vanderstouw

Coordinator / Department Chair
Clarkstown
Clarkstown Central School District
62 Old Middletown Road, New City, NY 10956
845-639-6300
cvanderstouw@ccsd.edu

John Griffiths

Assistant Superintendent /Curriculum Leader
Croton-Harmon
Croton-Harmon Union Free School District
10 Gerstein Street, Croton-On-Hudson, NY 10520
914-271-4713 x4203
john.griffiths@chufsd.org

Colleen Thompson

Coordinator / Department Chair
Darien
Darien Public Schools
35 Leroy Avenue, Darien, CT 06820
203-656-7400
cthompson@darienps.org

Shawn Hebert

Coordinator / Department Chair
Fayetteville-Manlius
Fayetteville-Manlius High School
8201 East Seneca Turnpike, Manlius, NY 13104
315-692-1851
shebert@fmschools.org

Melanie Sadoff

Teacher
Nanuet
Nanuet Senior High School
103 Church Street, Nanuet, NY 10954
845-627-9800
msadoff@nanuetasd.org

Simone Kuranishi

Teacher
North Shore
North Shore High School
450 Glen Cove Avenue, Glen Head, NY 11545
516-277-7000
kuranishis@northshoreschools.org

Russell Wagoner

Teacher
South Orangetown
Tappan Zee High School
15 Dutch Hill Road, Orangeburg, NY 10962
845-680-1600
rwagoner@socsd.org

April Woltersdorf

Teacher
Edgemont
Seely Place Elementary
51 Seely Place, Scarsdale, NY 10583
914-472-8040 x3329
awoltersdorf@edgemont.org

Darla Smyth

Teacher
Hewlett-Woodmere
George W. Hewlett High School
60 Everit Avenue, Hewlett, NY 11557
516-792-4001
dsmyth@hewlett-woodmere.net

Ari Rothman

Assistant Principal
New Canaan
New Canaan High School
11 Farm Road, New Canaan, CT 06840
203-594-4600
ari.rothman@ncps-k12.org

Dalia Rodriguez

Coordinator / Department Chair
North Shore
North Shore High School
450 Glen Cove Avenue, Glen Head, NY 11545
516-277-7000
rodriguez@northshoreschools.org

TRI-STATE LIAISONS:

Lauren Allan

Assistant Director
Tri-State Consortium
Lauren.allan@tristateconsortium.org

Andrew Selesnick

Executive Director
Tri-State Consortium
andrew.selesnick@tristateconsortium.org

Lisa Brady

Tri-State Consortium Staff
Tri-State Consortium
lisa.brady@tristateconsortium.org

Introduction

The Tri-State Consortium, a professional network of **fifty-four** 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 Princeton Public School District is, by every measure, a high-performing district and highly regarded as such both locally and nationally. As a long-time member of the Tri-States Consortium, the District has welcomed Tri-States to review multiple programs and initiatives over the years. The Consortium values its relationship with the Princeton Public Schools and appreciates the opportunity to engage with the District to learn more about the K-12 Visual and Performing Arts programs and to bring forward a visiting team with a wide range of experiences in these content areas, and instructional expertise.

The Princeton Public School District is located in central New Jersey, one of 13 districts in Mercer County. While the PK-8 students come from Princeton Township, high school students also include Cranbury Township students from neighboring Middlesex County. District enrollment has been growing and currently is approximately 3,800 students in grades PK-12. The student population is diverse, with 26.8% Asian, 12.2% Hispanic/Latino, 6.7% African-American, 11.5% Multiracial, and 42.7% Caucasian students. About 15.8% of students receive special education services, 6.1% are multilingual learners, and 15.6% are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. The district is home to six schools.

The Princeton Public Schools invited the visiting team to evaluate the district's K-12 Visual and Performing Arts program. Superintendent Michael LaSousa, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Kim Tew, Supervisor of K-12 Visual and Performing Arts, Patrick Lenihan, and talented, amazing students representing a variety of ensembles in the music program welcomed the team.

Essential Questions

The visiting team was asked to consider three essential questions to guide the visit.

Essential Question #1

To what extent are we providing opportunities for all learners to experience visibility and authentic engagement in the creative process, when considering scheduling, facilities, and resources?

Essential Question #2

To what extent does the Visual and Performing Arts department work in an interconnected way to design and implement our curricular programs across buildings, grade levels, and arts content areas?

Essential Question #3

To what extent does the arts department clearly and actively engage all stakeholders about the value and importance of an arts education experience?

The Scope of the Visit

During the introductory meeting, District representatives reviewed the essential questions and the overarching goal for the visit, including a desire to receive feedback regarding the K-12 Visual and Performing Arts program. The District has a strong commitment to the visual and performing arts. It holds a shared belief, stated in the department philosophy, that “active participation in an arts program is a critical component of every child’s education. Arts programs enrich students’ lives and provide a vehicle for them to communicate and express human emotions and ideas. The arts enable personal, intellectual, social, economic, and human growth by fostering creativity and providing opportunities for expression beyond the limits of language.”

The team spent three days in the district, November 12-14, 2025, examining district artifacts, visiting classrooms in all district schools, reviewing student artwork of all kinds, and interviewing administrators, teachers, students, and parents. On the third day, the Tri-State team facilitated a consultancy conversation between team members and district representatives, attended by teachers and staff from all schools and the District Office.

Response to Essential Questions

Essential Question #1

To what extent are we providing opportunities for all learners to experience visibility and authentic engagement in the creative process, when considering scheduling, facilities, and resources?

The visiting team focused on the crux of the question, which asks for feedback on the opportunities available to all learners. The visual and performing arts in Princeton are popular among students and a “gem” of the Princeton community. As is the case in many districts, scheduling can drive opportunities for all students, and this is true in Princeton as well. The District is blessed with numerous high-quality spaces and facilities in its buildings, and improvements to classrooms in multiple buildings are underway as part of a current bond project. The District allocates significant resources to the visual and performing arts programs in staffing, course offerings, and facilities. The District faces challenges, however, with equity and access to music education as students move from elementary school to middle school to high school. Parents and others shared concerns about the fact that many students receive private music lessons from a young age, and then compete with students who do not have these opportunities for precious “spots” in the prestigious upper-level programs.

Commendations

- To provide all students with the opportunity to participate in instrumental programs without financial barriers, the District offers a free “loaner instrument program” to families in need. The instruments may come from the district’s instrument collection or from a rental instrument vendor. Information for parents about this program is available in both English and Spanish to address language barriers.
- High school students volunteer to mentor elementary band/orchestra students in the *Music After School* (MAS) program. Teachers from all levels (elementary, middle school, and high school) work with the elementary students and high school mentors in this program. This program gives high school students opportunities to connect with elementary students as mentors. It is a free, district-wide initiative that provides equitable

access to supplemental instrumental music instruction for elementary students in grades 4 and 5. By eliminating cost barriers and offering transportation, the program ensures that all students—regardless of background—can experience growth through music-making and community.

- The manner in which education in the arts is delivered, particularly at the primary levels, is built on classroom cultures that are safe, inclusive, engaging, and purposefully focused on personal and social development.
- There is strong administrative support for music programs with a low student-to-teacher ratio and favorable scheduling at the middle and high school. The music staff at the secondary levels appreciate a schedule that supports lessons and ensembles.
- The choir program is inclusive at all grade levels and provides access for all ability levels.
- Participation rates are high across all music ensembles.
- The district provides middle school band students and high school Tiger 1 and 2 band students with a smart music account, “Make Music.”

Recommendations

- Provide opportunities for middle school and high school students to take non-ensemble music classes such as music appreciation, guitar, percussion, and composition.
- Consider the limitations of current scheduling practices in middle school so that the arts are a “guaranteed experience” for all students. Currently, some students can go three years in middle school without a class in art or drama. This creates an inconsistency in preparation for visual and performing arts classes at the high school level, creating a disadvantage for some students who are blocked out because of scheduling challenges.

- Consider the size of the middle school choral program and whether or not it has a level of support consistent with the other music programs across the district.
- Consider how wind instrument choice in the earlier grades aligns with the district's commitment to a strong jazz program at the high school level. Clarifying which instruments fit that pathway could help ensure students are set up for meaningful participation as they move up through the program.
- Consider changing the floor in the dance studio to maximize students' opportunities to engage in dance and musical theater courses and to achieve a higher level of technical proficiency and a deeper understanding of dance theory, history, anatomy, and genres.
- Although the District offers afterschool enrichment opportunities and clubs, a lack of transportation afterward limits participation for some students. Additionally, scheduling performances and art shows in the evening limits attendance for families without transportation. Consider ways of allocating transportation resources to address this need.
- Consider alternative schedules that provide students with the opportunity to deepen their understanding of musical concepts, techniques, and skills during the school day. This inclusivity model will benefit all students and level the playing field.
- Consider offering music courses for students outside the performing ensembles. For example, a music theory Level 1 course for those non-musicians, as well as opportunities to explore formal music composition.
- Reflect on and analyze the barriers that prevent many students from participating in the highest-performing groups.
- Reflect on and consider the discrepancy in how elementary schedules are built, and the different opportunities those schedules create for students.

- Consider providing students with choice in the Exploratory Program (including visual arts and theater) at the middle school level.
- Reflect on the impact of the current practice of shortening instructional time for all students to support combined rehearsals at the middle school, and consider alternative rehearsal scheduling models.
- Reflect on the impact that sharing spaces has on instruction in visual arts, dance, and theater.
- Consider ways to further promote the high school art gallery, such as clear signage, and consider using the hallways in the Performing Arts Center to display student artwork.
- Consider how the jazz focus of ensembles at the high school might limit equitable participation, even among students who chose non-jazz instruments from the district's offerings in 3rd grade.
- Consider developing general music classes that include composition and digital music for middle and high school students.
- Consider developing digital visual art classes.
- Consider the potential for the Community Park School special area classes to be taught in Spanish as part of the dual language immersion program.
- Consider adding Advanced Placement Studio Art and Advanced Placement Dance.

Essential Question #2

To what extent does the Visual and Performing Arts department work in an interconnected way to design and implement our curricular programs across buildings, grade levels, and arts content areas?

The Visual and Performing Arts department takes great pride in the many ways it connects across the District schools and with the greater Princeton community. The source of this pride is made evident by the many productions, concerts, shows, displays, galleries, and student and staff-led projects.

Professional time for the visual and performing arts department to meet and collaborate is available bi-monthly. Yet, some teachers expressed a need and desire for more time to work with colleagues across the district and to engage with colleagues across the region. Some staff expressed that such practices were in place pre-COVID but have not been reinstated, and that this is a missed opportunity.

There is a strong elementary-to-middle school transition that demonstrates communication across buildings to assist staff members with grade five-to-six transitions and to help determine appropriate groupings for lessons.

General Music instruction at the elementary schools explicitly fosters skills such as rhythm reading, the “Ta, TiTi Ta” Kodaly system, dexterity on the recorder, and singing in harmony and rounds as a means of promoting a firm foundation that translates to the other music disciplines at the upper grade levels. The African Culture through Dance Lesson teaches African dance to French and Dance students. It can also be linked to lessons in history, geography, music, and art, providing a holistic educational experience with cross-curricular connections.

An annual district-wide art show displays the entire K-12 continuum of learning in the visual arts, and the Eighth Grade Performing Arts Showcase provides eighth-grade students about to enter high school the opportunity to experience each performing arts discipline in advance. Eighth

graders are provided the opportunity to speak directly with all the high school arts teachers at the event and are also supplied with an FAQ sheet to take home to discuss options with their parents. All fifth-grade students travel to the middle school to preview the middle school musical production as an introduction to musical theater options and the greater middle school community. At the middle school, band programming for each concert features a wide variety of musical repertoire from around the world, exposing students to music from other countries and cultures. Elementary art teachers collaborate using a shared Google Drive folder in which they have access to each other's projects and works so that all students can benefit from the creative output of the various teachers and the projects they design. Students in Studio Art 1 and AP Art History create a monthly newsletter that is emailed to parents and guardians to connect across the curriculum.

Commendations

- Various staff give attention to the elementary school-to-middle school-to-high school transitions. Schedules for students to meet new teachers and learn about programs are provided through assemblies and small-group 'meet and greets.' Current instrumental students do 'pop-up concerts' throughout the year to spur interest in beginning or continuing music instruction.
- Students in the Visual and Performing Arts department have opportunities to engage in authentic assessments and to design posters and playbill covers.
- Improved coordination of performances and gallery shows across levels and schools has allowed families with students at different schools to avoid having to choose what to attend, as well as giving equal exposure and value to events at all levels.

- Teachers have found ways to coordinate and collaborate in very creative ways. For example, the general music teacher and art teacher at Johnson Park Elementary create opportunities to bring art and music to life through shared, connected experiences.
- The high school musical performance combines over 100 students across acting, technical theater, visual design, vocal music, and instrumental music through a vertically aligned curriculum, resulting in Marquee Award nominations and recognition.
- There is a very creative collaboration among art, science, and library media teachers at one elementary school to bring students outside to learn about local foliage and use these materials to create art in nature across all grade levels.
- Theatrical productions provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate across disciplines.
- Choral teachers (and those in other ensembles) travel to different buildings to support student recruitment.
- The “AutoTuning Trombone Student Innovation Project” illustrates how the Visual and Performing Arts Department cultivates inventive, independent thinkers who apply artistic and technical skills to create original solutions with real-world applications.
- All stakeholders with a connection to the music program hold it in very high regard.

Recommendations

- Consider creating protected collaboration time for all visual and performing arts teachers across schools.
- Create “look fors” - *what does a high-quality arts lesson look like?* in each discipline - for administrators when they are visiting classes, and to build a common understanding of what the district means by “high-quality.”

- Develop departmental lesson plans, instructional goals, and progression maps to create greater cohesion.
- Consider providing students with choice in the Exploratory Program (including visual arts and theater) at the middle school level.
- Consider a commitment to developing processes to help visual and performing arts teachers gain a deeper understanding of curriculum and pedagogical practices to ensure consistency vertically and horizontally.

Essential Question #3

To what extent does the arts department clearly and actively engage all stakeholders about the value and importance of an arts education experience?

The visiting team met with a variety of stakeholders, including administrators, members of the Board of Education, parents, students, teachers, and other staff. Without exception, visual and performing arts education in Princeton schools is valued, honored, and a point of pride. It is clear that many students have exceptionally strong experiences through the music program and the other fine or visual arts as currently offered. Nonetheless, stakeholders also expressed concerns and challenges around the inclusivity and equity of these programs. Lack of transportation and scheduling of art shows, concerts, and other cultural events are impediments for some families (and some evidence suggests this may be particularly true for families of ELL students). Within the District, staff in all buildings expressed that the music program is perceived to receive preferential treatment over other areas in the arts and other curricular areas. Concerns were voiced about the loss of instructional time when teachers travel to Europe (or other far-off locations) with the music program. Additionally, art teachers shared that the

emphasis on the music program detracts from the development of the visual arts. The district might consider engaging teachers, parents, and students in discussions to further understand these concerns.

Commendations

- Band parent meetings are held once per month, and parents of students in any band are invited to attend. These meetings support a strong home-school connection.
- Master classes taught by practicing professionals and parent-artisans/performers are plentiful and offered across schools and levels.
- Students in the performing arts have a variety of performance opportunities within the community to engage with all stakeholders.
- The district supports participation by paying for students' instruments when necessary and providing free access to performances.

Recommendations

- Find innovative and broader ways to celebrate the visual arts
 - Boosting attendance at art shows - lawn signs, the local paper, broad use of social media, etc.
 - Increase promotion of the student arts magazine.
 - Include student art displays at Board of Education meetings.
 - Connect art shows to other school events.
 - Consider displaying art work throughout the year in the halls of the Performing Arts Center.

- Consider reviewing data on declining enrollment for specific subgroups in music programs (as they move up in grades).
- Consider opportunities for theatrical performances at the elementary school level.
- Consider providing transportation to art shows.
- Consider how the jazz focus of ensembles at the high school might limit equitable participation, even among students who chose instruments from the district's offerings in 3rd grade.

Conclusion

Princeton has a long, proud tradition of dedication to and support for the arts, with a particular emphasis on music. During this visit, we found much evidence that warrants such pride. We learned that it is considered “cool” to be a student of the arts in Princeton and, importantly, that students feel welcomed and supported in school, no matter how they express themselves. This is a school culture of which many districts would be envious, and the emphasis on and celebration of the arts is an integral part of such a culture.

Despite the many evident strengths, the district's three essential questions focused on curricular interconnectedness and on student access to the incredible opportunities available to many. We applaud the district's willingness to self-reflect and seek out areas for improvement, and our commendations and recommendations are made in the spirit of critical friendship.

The many outstanding accomplishments of the district's music program and its traditional focus on jazz performance seem to sit in tension with essential questions that ask about the interconnectedness of all arts curricula and equity of access for all students. The

recommendations presented above ask the district to consider how it defines success in the arts for all students, and how (or whether) the highest levels of achievement in one area can be pursued without sacrifices in other areas. We encourage the district to continue its own investigation of these questions by holding focus groups with staff, parents, and students, to determine whether its own values support some of the recommendations suggested in this report. The thoughtfulness and desire for collaboration that we encountered among all stakeholders in Princeton suggest that such a process will be meaningful and productive for the district.

The Tri-State team is grateful for the district's warm welcome and attention to detail during the visit. All aspects of the visit were well coordinated. The schedule provided us with ample opportunity to learn from stakeholders, to visit classrooms, and to study artifacts provided. We hope our feedback is helpful to Princeton and we look forward to remaining in conversation with the district as you move forward.