



**Tri-State
Consortium**

Eastchester Union Free School District

TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2023

Guidance

April 19-21, 2023

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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 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 Eastchester School District is, by every measure, highly regarded locally and regionally. 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 Eastchester Public Schools and appreciates the opportunity to engage with the District to learn more about the **9-12 Guidance: College and Career Services** and to bring forward a visiting team with a wide range of experiences within the high school counseling services field.

The Eastchester Union Free School District is a K-12 public school district serving students and families in the Town of Eastchester and portions of Tuckahoe and Scarsdale in Southern Westchester County. The District currently serves 3056 students in grades K-12. The high school enrolls 975 students. About 15% of students in the district receive Special Education services, 5% receive ENL support, and 2% are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. Demographic data reported for students in the District is as follows: American Indian/Alaskan Native 0.2%, Black 2.3%, Hispanic 14.5%, Asian 15.5%, White 64.6%, and Multiracial 2.9%. The district's graduation rate is 97.3%, as reported by the 2022-2023 District Profile.

The Eastchester School District invited the visiting team to evaluate the District's **9-12 Guidance: College and Career Services**. Superintendent Dr. Ron Valenti, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Scott Wynn, Assistant Superintendent for PPS Dr. Greg Stowell, High School Principal Dr. Jeff Capuano, Assistant Principal Joseph Gilson, and Assistant Principal

Guiseppe DiMaio, along with all members of the high school guidance staff, welcomed the team. The visiting team considered three essential questions and provided feedback on two Tri-State indicators to guide the program review.

The team spent three days in the district, April 19-21, 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 administrators and 9-12 guidance staff. The visit concluded with a debriefing meeting between some members of the visiting team and the District Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, and Assistant Superintendent for PPS.

Essential Question and Quality Indicators

Essential Question 1

To what extent does the structure of the EHS Guidance Department and the daily work of school counselors maximize how counselors are able to know their students and have students achieve individual post-secondary plans/outcomes?

In our meetings with students in the high school - the team met with juniors and seniors - it is clear that students know and generally like their counselors. Although there were some exceptions, students and their parents value and appreciate having the same counselor for four years and keeping the same counselor for siblings, as is the practice in the district. Counselors seek information from various sources - peers, parents, teachers - to get to know and understand students for whom they are responsible. Students expressed that their counselors “get them” and are encouraged to pursue different pathways if they have interests other than college. Students did not believe that counselors were discouraging them from applying to “reach” schools but that a lot of emphasis was placed on “safety schools.” There was an

understanding that counselors encourage students to be realistic but that, at times, this could be perceived as lowered expectations and could feel discouraging. Alumni that met with the visiting team via Zoom expressed that they all applied to “reach schools,” and so did their friends. Seniors who met with the visiting team were all headed for highly regarded colleges, including Cornell, Elon, Syracuse, and Penn State.

Structures in the counseling department to maximize work with students are challenging to understand. Although processes exist in the department, the degree to which these are consistent or efficient should be considered. The department has minimal clerical support in an area of the organization that has diverse clerical needs. Counselors are attending to these needs, such as uploading transcripts, making appointments with parents, CSE meetings, 504 meetings, collating letters of recommendation, assisting with college essays, and other tasks that diminish the amount of time that they can spend in direct, one-on-one counseling services to students. The counselors also have a lot of special education responsibilities that are uncommon for counselors in other districts.

Commendations

- The counseling services department has an extensive college planning packet for parents and students.
- Counselors are deeply committed to their students and work hard to meet the needs of students and families.
- A clear and developmentally appropriate packet in the 8th Grade Matters Packet is provided to students and parents.
- Welcome presentation information clearly outlines the role of the counselor/counseling services.

- The alphabetical structure of the department, which keeps students with the same counselor for four years and families with the same counselor, is valued by many stakeholders.
- Counselors use various strategies for getting to know students, including peer feedback, parent and teacher feedback, and self-reflection tools.
- Counselor caseloads are on par with surrounding districts.

Recommendations

- Consider exploring digital solutions for communicating and disseminating information to parents and students.
- Consider a review of the job responsibilities of counselors to allow them more time to attend to college and career counseling.
- Seek and develop networking opportunities with counselors in neighboring districts to learn what technology solutions and options are available to help streamline and find efficiencies for the department's work.
- Seek ways to ensure more parental involvement in the process.
- Consider reviewing staffing in the department. Although the caseload for counselors is on par with other districts, the clinical and clerical support are lower, with one clerical, a .5 FTE Social Worker, and 1.0 FTE school psychologist.
- Seek ways for counselors to have more individual, one-on-one time with students to understand and know them as well as possible, especially their post-secondary wishes.
- Consider developing and implementing clear expectations for the amount/quality of student/parent contact to allow for more consistency across counselors.
- Consider scheduling more individual time for students as part of the scheduling process to augment the 10-minute program in the gym.
- Email follow-up with parents after student meetings. Consider inviting parents to student scheduling meetings via Zoom.

- Create a timeline/calendar of the activities counselors do and when they do them.
- Make individual contact with parents who cannot make the 8 a.m. parent meetings.
- Engage the counselors in discussions about the professional development experiences that would enhance their work.

Essential Question 2

To what extent are students and families aware of and accessing college and career preparatory services offered by the EHS Guidance Department?

In reviewing the evidence and artifacts provided by the District to the visiting team, it is clear that there is a voluminous amount of documents, forms, and paper utilized in the department and made available to students and parents. It needs to be clarified to what extent students and parents are aware of all that is available since there is no tracking system, primarily due to the lack of technology solutions being used consistently among counselors. Some counselors are using individual Google Classrooms to post and disseminate information. The counseling tab on the high school webpage has some helpful information. Still, it needs a refresh and could be utilized more robustly for archiving information and providing more “self-service” for students and families. There is a need for well-articulated communication between parents and counselors, especially with international and first-time college families requiring different support levels. Parents not educated in American schools express even greater confusion with the process. Counselors voiced frustration with the level of “hand-holding” sought by some parents who seem unable to “partner” with the school and believe that all responsibility for the college process rests with the school. The visiting team met with parents who seemed aware that a partnership is necessary, but the extent to which all parents share this belief is unclear. Clarifying roles and expectations for parents and counselors needs to be discussed, and a “path forward” charted for all stakeholders to ensure that students and parents feel they are receiving

the individual attention they seek. In the current conditions, family education is perceived by counselors as being very time-consuming. It is not something that they can fully provide, given the constraints of their jam-packed schedules.

Commendations

- The department offers parent information workshops, including Grade 9 Parent Night and Grade 10 College Planning Night.
- The department offers a Grade 11 College Planning Workshop.
- The High School hosts an annual Financial Aid Night.
- Information and a video from Financial Aid Night are found on the website.
- Parents are invited to provide information about their child on the Grade 10 Brag Sheet.
- Students complete a confidential autobiography sheet each year so that counselors have a fuller picture of students over the years.
- Some information about the college process is available on the website.

Recommendations

- Consider using online guides with tasks, videos, and links so that parents and students have the tools to do more independently and give more time for counselors to work with students on “specifics.”
- Consider refreshing and reorganizing the website to achieve better utilization of this resource.
- Consider an audit and revision of communication strategies to determine how parents and students prefer to receive information and track metrics on who is using what - when, and why.
- Explore the advantages of uniformity in service delivery and work toward this goal.
- Ensure the consistent use of Naviance among all counselors.

- In the event a new director is hired, clarify who is leading the department. Also, clarify to whom in the district office the department's leader reports.
- Consider differentiation of parent workshops to meet parent needs better.
 - First-time parents
 - Parents new to the American school system
 - Parents with older children who have already accessed the system
- Create the conditions for more collaborative work with parents and welcoming of parent input/feedback.
- Consider how the high school can leverage connections with colleges and college representatives.

Essential Question 3

To what extent is the EHS Guidance Department connected with admissions offices at colleges and universities and provides broad, diverse exposure (relative to selectivity, location, cost, size, academic programs, legacy status, etc.) to colleges/universities and career pathways to students?

Connections with admissions offices were substantially limited during the pandemic, but things are slowly returning to an average school/college partnership level for districts. Eastchester High School counselors value college and university partnerships and opportunities for face-to-face interactions; however, their responsibilities constrain their daily schedules. Counselors report that they have a budget for travel which can be used for college visits or professional development. Still, the challenges of time and an overload of responsibilities are an impediment. Representatives from colleges visit the high school, but how many students and parents avail themselves of these opportunities is still being determined. It is important to note that admissions offices are receptive to contact with school-based counselors; however, these interactions are welcomed for different reasons at different times of the year. The counselors

shared that they find that opportunities for networking with colleagues in other districts have been helpful in the past. Expanding access to admissions offices can also be accomplished in collaboration with neighboring districts for a more regional approach to professional learning and relationships for college admissions. During the visit, it was clear that some parents have become concerned about the counseling department's knowledge and expertise related to the college process. Contracting with an outside expert to host a program for parents, teachers, and students to discuss changes in how colleges select students might be prudent to establish a common understanding of how things work in 2023.

Commendations

- The high school hosts college visits from admissions officers for juniors and seniors; a visit schedule is on the website.
- School counselors value relationships with colleges and trade schools and understand that these relationships are essential in understanding what students need to know and be able to do for successful admissions.
- Counselors are open to professional development opportunities, including networking with colleagues about the changing college and career landscape.

Recommendations

- Increase opportunities for professional learning for high school counselors.
- Develop a plan for a College and Career Awareness Day to share information about changes in the college landscape and expose students to more information about careers.
- Encourage using Zoom or Google Meet for counselors to establish relationships, especially when travel is limited. This can be with colleges and with parents.

- Make travel to colleges a priority. Colleges are happy to host counselors, but time is needed for counselors to engage in this way.
- Utilize outside speakers and resources to share current information and establish credibility for high school counselors with the parents and the greater community.
- Use Naviance RepVisits, or a similar program, to schedule the colleges. This will automate the system and save time and work. The counselor sets up the calendar, and the colleges do everything else directly.
- Invite college representatives to speak to families during evening meetings.
- Engage with college admissions officers to ascertain how Eastchester High School students are **actually** performing academically in these institutions since this is a factor in the admissions process.

Indicator #6: Equitable Support for Student Needs

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

Student academic and mental health needs are escalating across all schools nationally, making the need for precise data and evidence more critical than ever. The Eastchester School District surveyed students, teachers, and parents in 2022 to better understand their experiences with counseling services. The data show that although most students, 52%, seek their counselor for

issues related to academic achievement, only 23% seek their school counselor for social/emotional support. Additionally, 61% seek help with the college process, and 48% for career counseling. It should be noted that across categories, about 30% of students responded that they neither agree nor disagreed with the questions making it challenging to understand the feedback of this group without some focus group work to understand these experiences better.

Another area of concern involves the number of course failures reported by counselors. In June 2022, 55 students failed 84 courses, with 38 students attending summer school in 2022. In 2019, 54 students failed 87 classes. Counselors also reported that 28% take calculus and 11% take AP Literature. These numbers are noteworthy since colleges look for AP courses and calculus when reviewing student transcripts for college acceptance. Dropping courses and dropping levels in courses is also worthy of exploration. In the 2022-2023 school year, 134 students dropped classes after the year began, and 76 students dropped a level since the beginning. Increases for non-Regents geometry and non-Regents Algebra II have also increased significantly. When asked in a focus group about this data, students believed that stress reduction was the primary reason.

Prerequisites exist for entrance into Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Although there is a waiver process, there needs to be more clarity between what district administrators and building administrators report about this process. District administrators say getting “waived into” courses is challenging, and building administrators report the opposite.

A “deep dive” into issues related to the curricular program and the number of course failures, drops, and level changes is fundamental to understanding how students can be better prepared and encouraged to engage with rigorous coursework. Since the strength of the student

transcript and resume are foundational to success in accessing and being accepted into desirable colleges and universities, this emerges as central to the discussion.

Commendations

- Counselors use Naviance assessment results to help guide 9th-grade course selection.
- There is a waiver process for students to gain admission to courses where teachers have yet to recommend them.
- Counselors closely monitor and track student course failures and try to intervene with needed support.

Recommendations

- Engage with a series of student focus groups to gather feedback from the 30% of students who are non-committal on the surveys to ascertain their experiences and needs.
- Consider supports in place in classes and how adding additional support can increase access to AP and Honors classes.
- Consider a more significant emphasis at Grade 8 Career Day on Naviance's career planning elements as a follow-up to the early introductions in grades 6-8.
- Consider giving parents an early introduction to the items available in Naviance.
- Students are exposed to "push-in lessons" to give a thorough overview of the PSAT test and the results. Consider giving the same to parents.

Indicator #8: Parent and Community Support

The district actively involves parents and community constituent groups in ongoing two-way communication to advance student learning. A wide range of community resources extends the classroom and enriches the educational experience of students. The budget development process supports the mission, vision, and goals of the district, is aligned with efforts to advance student learning, and is supported by the community.

Communication is critical to ensure the success of any organization and is especially important for schools. It is common to hear that communication needs improvement; however, effective communication is a two-way experience. It is not enough to simply “push” documents, forms, and materials out to parents and students. Even leveraging a robust website that encourages a greater degree of “self-service,” there still must be opportunities for parents and school counselors to connect personally. The middle school and high school host various programs and presentations for parents and students. It is unclear how well-attended these programs are and if parents find them helpful.

Easy-to-complete surveys are an efficient and effective way to gather constituents' feedback. The District surveyed parents, teachers, and students during the 2022-2023 school year to ascertain satisfaction with the 9-12 counseling services program. Data collected indicate that there might be work to do with parents to strengthen the district's parent/counselor relationships. For example, only 49% of parents report that school counselors provide important college preparation information to parents and students, and only 33% say that school counselors provide career information. This clearly isn't the case, so why does this discrepancy exist? Regarding social and emotional learning (SEL), 45% of parents seek support from counselors for their child's SEL needs, and 34% believe that counselors enhance their child's SEL

experience in school. Overall, about 63% of parents say that they understand the role of a school counselor.

School counselors provide various opportunities for parents to offer information about their children, but more personal, face-to-face interactions are needed. Counselors are receptive to meeting with parents yet remain constrained by their daily schedules. Looking at “flex” days where parents who work during the day could meet with counselors on some evenings might also help engage with ALL parents.

Currently, there is a focus on the number of students who leave the Eastchester Public Schools for private schools at the middle and high school levels. More might be done to reach out to these families to understand better their reasons for leaving the District.

Commendations

- The District has surveyed stakeholders about their experiences with the 9-12 counseling services experience.
- The high school offers an 8th-grade parent night as part of the transition to high school.
- Parents, teachers, and counselors are involved in reviewing student course selections.
- The high school offers opportunities for parent involvement, especially with the grade 9 Parent Night, which is interactive and in-person.
- Parent involvement opportunities include the Grade 10 brag sheet.
- The District budget process includes provisions for hiring additional staff and supporting counselor travel and other resources.

Recommendations

- Consider working with an outside vendor to assist with refreshing the counseling services section of the website.
- Consider sharing data from the most recent surveys and setting up focus groups with parents to do a “deeper dive” into the responses to understand better what students and parents are saying.
- Develop an action plan to address areas for growth based on the survey data.
- Consider engaging with local community organizations, attending meetings/luncheons, and participating in activities that allow district representatives to talk about the excellent work being done in the district.
- Consider a review and refresh of the Eastchester High School School Profile to better communicate the strength of the District to colleges and recruiters.
- Consider a personal outreach by top-level administrators to families who have decided to leave the district to ascertain why.
- Consider the possibility of scheduling an annual meeting with each student and his/her/their parents.

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, alums, 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 new school board members. The community looks to this governance body to provide children with a safe environment and high-quality academic experience. College and post-secondary plans have emerged as an area of wondering for some in the community, including parents of elementary school children, which could affect demographics and enrollment in the future.

The visit team was impressed with the counseling department - the counselors are dedicated to their students, know them well, and advocate for them. The parents with whom we met wonder if the counselors might be more aspirational in their ideas about the colleges to which their students are applying. It is a question worth exploring.

We also wonder whether the educational program, grades K-12, lends itself to enabling more students to apply to and gain acceptance into top-tier colleges. Are there district structures and norms that interfere with this goal, such as access to higher-level courses?

We hope the feedback from this visit will give the District ideas to consider and implement as it progresses. Leadership matters and the District is encouraged to look at the K-12 Counseling Services program and identify a clear leader with responsibility to all students and families in the District. A more comprehensive approach can help to ensure that the groundwork exists early on so that prospects for college and beyond are developed earlier for students and parents and goals can be established. A stronger alignment with the academic program and long-term college and career goals is necessary for increased success.