

**Tri-State Consultancy Report**  
**Trumbull Board of Education**  
**May 17, 2016**

**Key Points**

The Purpose

“The intent of the Tri-State team is to affirm and confirm the district’s efforts to further critical and creative thinking within the writing curriculum and offer recommendations that can further the district’s efforts” (6).

Specific Strengths in Student Writing Outcomes

“Writing is embedded in all [K-5] curriculum areas through the use of math journals, science notebooks, reading response journals and research projects, which allow students to respond to questions, and share their thinking and approach to problem solving. . . . At the middle school level, in grades 6-8, . . . [s]tudents are engaged in writing to discover meaning and process information, to demonstrate positions, thoughts and new learning, to explore and develop creative perspectives, and to reflect and self-evaluate. Faculty have designed writing activities which are meaningful and relevant to students’ lives. . . . [O]ur conversations with [grades 9-12] students consistently reflected an awareness of the emphasis on writing in most of their classes, a deep respect for their teachers, an interest in learning to edit their peers, the chance to reflect on their own learning” (6-8).

Specific Strengths in the Teaching & Learning of Writing

“The Tri-State team concluded, after examining the artifacts, interviewing, and observing teachers and students engaged within classrooms, that there is strong support and evidence-based decision making in place to develop critical and creative thinking skills within the writing program. Teachers and leaders showed positive collaborative spirit when discussing the future development of their writing programs and a strong commitment to support a common vision. Students at all levels demonstrated a thoughtful ability to speak about their writing as a process and appeared engaged in classrooms the team visited. In our conversations with teachers and administrators across the buildings, we consistently heard an enthusiastic desire to advance a cohesive district approach to writing instruction” (8).

Toward Next Steps

“The team recommends that the district vision include a clear link between the student learning that will be deepened through a learner-centered instructional approach, expanded assessment practices, and professional learning experiences. The district appears poised and eager to take these steps, and the visiting team experienced this commitment through our review of documents and time spent observing and interviewing administrators, teachers, students and parents. We found dedicated, highly professional teachers, at all levels, who are interested in their own professional growth in tandem with the continuous growth of their students” (11).



**Tri-State  
Consortium**

**TRUMBULL PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2016**

Writing Across the Curriculum, K-12: February 22-24, 2016



## Tri-State Consortium

# TRUMBULL PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2016

Writing Across the Curriculum, K-12: February 22-24, 2016

**Stephanie Pierson-Ugol, Co-Leader**

Assistant Superintendent  
Easton-Redding, Reg. 9  
Easton-Redding Public Schools  
654 Morehouse Road, P.O. Box 500, Easton, CT  
06612  
203-261-2513 x 103  
spersonugol@er9.org

**Andrea Rogers**

Teacher  
Bedford  
Bedford Hills Elementary School  
123 Babbit Road, Bedford Hills, NY 10507  
914-241-6000 x5927  
arogers0945@bcSDny.org

**Carol Priore, Co-Leader**

Assistant Superintendent  
Mamaroneck  
Mamaroneck Union Free School District  
1000 West Boston Post Road, Mamaroneck, NY 10543  
914-220-3000  
cpriore@mamkschools.org

**Edgar McIntosh**

Director of Instruction and Human Resources  
Briarcliff Manor  
Briarcliff Manor School District  
45 Ingham Road, Briarcliff Manor, NY 10510  
914-432-8005  
EMcIntosh@briarcliffschools.org

**Kerri Bianchi**

Assistant Principal  
Croton-Harmon  
Carrie E. Tompkins  
8 Gerstein St., Croton-on-Hudson, NY 10520  
914 271 5184  
kerri.bianchi@chufsd.org

**Danielle Lingo**

Grade 7/8 Teacher  
Easton-Redding, Reg. 9  
John Read Middle School  
486 Redding Road, Redding, CT 06896  
203-938-2533  
dlingo@er9.org

**Christine Galbo**

Teacher  
Mount Pleasant  
Columbus Elementary School  
580 Columbus Ave., Thornwood, NY 10594  
914-769-8538  
cgalbo@mtplcsd.org

**Jocelyn Dumaresq**

English Supervisor  
Scotch Plains-Fanwood  
Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School  
667 Westfield Road, Scotch Plains, NJ 07076  
908-889-8600  
JDumaresq@spfk12.org

**Guy Stella**

Superintendent  
Woodbridge  
Woodbridge Public Schools  
40 Beecher Road, Woodbridge, CT 06525  
203-387-6631  
gstella@woodbridge.k12.ct.us

**Tim Sorensen**

Teacher  
Darien  
Middlesex Middle School  
204 Hollow Tree Ridge Road, Darien, CT 06820  
203-655-2518 x3612  
tsorensen@darienps.org

**Denise Earles**

Curriculum Leader  
Madison  
Madison Public Schools  
10 Campus Drive, Madison, CT 06443  
203-245-6475  
earlesd@madison.k12.ct.us

**Stephanie DeBonis**

Teacher  
North Shore  
Glenwood Landing  
60 Cody Ave., Glen Head, NY 11545  
516-277-7615  
deboniss@northshoreschools.org

**Sasha Slocum**

Principal  
Scotch Plains-Fanwood  
Mc Ginn School  
1100 Roosevelt Avenue, Scotch Plains, NJ 07076  
908-233-7950  
sslocum@spfk12.org

**Mary Vincitorio**

Teacher  
Woodbridge  
Beecher Road School  
40 Beecher Road, Woodbridge, CT 06525  
203-392-3542  
mvincitorio@woodbridge.k12.ct.us

**TRI-STATE LIAISONS:**

**Kathleen Reilly**

Director of Training

Tri-State Consortium

203-762-2004

kathleenreillyct@gmail.com

**Martin G. Brooks**

Executive Director

Tri-State Consortium

631-478-9954

mgbrooks@optonline.net

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***“The Trumbull Public School System, in partnership with the community, strives to meet the educational needs of all students within a challenging and supportive academic environment that empowers each student to become a life-long learner and to live and participate in a democratic, diverse and global society.” TPS Mission***

The Trumbull Public Schools invited a Tri-State Consortium visiting team comprised of representative administrators and teachers from our member districts to benchmark the district’s current approach to writing K-12. Trumbull has been a longstanding and valued member of the Consortium(2001), and our mission statement describes, ***“...a dynamic learning organization of public school districts that values systems thinking as the foundation for continuous improvement.”*** As the Consortium enters its second decade, our core beliefs remain focused on authentic and interdisciplinary teaching and learning and purposeful assessment practices that are directly linked to optimal student performance. Trumbull’s efforts to “...create a culture for continuous improvement” and to build capacity for professional growth throughout the district is outlined in the documents, “A Professional Learning Community” and “Core Beliefs.” The format of this visit was structured as a Consultancy; that is, our three days in the district consisted of a district presentation, examining documents of curricular and assessment evidence, interviews with staff, students and parents at each of the district’s schools, and a culminating conversation between Trumbull’s representatives and Tri-State team members on the final day. Certainly, one of the highlights of our visit was the generosity of the administrators and teachers in each school who invited us into their classrooms to create an authentic experience of the writing life of Trumbull students.

When the Tri-State team arrived at the District Office, the meeting space was decorated with current student exemplars in writing across the curriculum; authentic student work representing Science, Social Studies, Language Arts, and Mathematics were displayed on tables and Tri-folds that lined the sides of the room. There was a “Poet-tree” with elementary student’s poetry on each branch! The team was immediately struck by this student-centered environment, and the thoughtful preparation that clearly reflected the daily experiences of Trumbull students. This first impression set the warm and inclusive tone that we experienced throughout our visit.

Superintendent of Schools, Gary Cialfi, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessments, Jonathan Budd, and members of the leadership team welcomed the team and were available to answer questions and clarify evidence during our entire time in the district. Each district

representative--- Terry Buckingham, K-5 Program Leader, English Language Arts / Reading; Dana Pierce, Booth Hill Elementary School Principal; Lisa Ryan, Hillcrest Middle School English Language Arts / Reading Instructional Leader; Peter Sullivan, Madison Middle School Assistant Principal; Jodi Netting, Trumbull High School Writing Center Director; Anne Rizza, Trumbull High School English teacher--- discussed the subheadings of the Essential Question, described the current instructional approach to teaching writing at each level and outlined the district's profile for the Tri-State consultants' consideration. They asked that we consider an Essential Question based on the district's goal to strengthen student performance through an emphasis on critical and creative thinking and communication skills, particularly in the area of writing across the curriculum. The responses to this question are meant to assist Trumbull in the future planning of their writing program throughout the district. The intent of the Tri-State team is to affirm and confirm the district's efforts to further critical and creative thinking within the writing curriculum and offer recommendations that can further the district's efforts.

**Essential Question: To what extent does our current approach to the teaching of writing K-12:**

- **Reflect instructional strategies that are consistent and focused on critical/creative thinking skills;**
- **Use a variety of assessment data to inform instruction; and**
- **Include appropriate professional learning to support our approach?**

To assist the Tri-State Consortium visiting team, the District's planning committee presented background information outlining the current approach to the teaching of writing, the instructional resources available to teachers, examples of student work that reflect writing across the curriculum, and the assessment methods utilized to inform instruction. In Kindergarten-5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, teachers are moving toward a writer's workshop model, reflecting the district's approach to writing instruction. A variety of resources are available to support classroom teachers in the design of units of study around narrative, opinion, informational writing and poetry. Writing is embedded in all curriculum areas through the use of math journals, science notebooks, reading response journals and research projects, which allow students to respond to questions, and share their thinking and approach to problem solving. At the elementary level an emphasis has been placed on the articulation of assessment calendars and an alignment between building and individual classroom teachers' goals with district-wide goals, as well as consistency in the use of a common rubric to assess student writing. Professional learning structures, such as the K-5 Communities of Practice, professional development days, sub-cadre time, and focused learning during faculty meetings have led elementary staff toward common practices and student expectations.

At the middle school level, in grades 6-8, there is a collaborative spirit and a team structure that supports students agreed upon interdisciplinary goals. Students are engaged in writing to discover meaning and process information, to demonstrate positions, thoughts and new learning, to explore and develop creative perspectives, and to reflect and self-evaluate. Faculty has designed writing activities which are meaningful and relevant to students' lives. They have encouraged exploration of genres and writing from personal experiences, incorporating student-generated questions, interests and concerns. Consistency in the use of rubrics and checklists for the purpose of student self-assessment and assessment to inform instruction is in place at this level. Google Docs and Google Classroom are utilized to support real-time student feedback and collaboration. A shift to authentic application of writing skills and writing for a specific audience is embedded through a range of digital platforms and technology. Resources at this level include the use of Language Arts Instructional Specialists who provide coaching and support to classroom teachers in model lessons, assistance with small group instruction and individual conferring. A redesign of the Media Center Specialist allows for co-teaching opportunities and support in the research process, as well as the Technology Integration Specialists who train staff on technological tools to enhance student productivity and presentations.

Our comprehensive experience at Trumbull High School was organized by Marc Guarino, Principal; Todd Manuel, Jennifer Chirles and Julie Luby, House Principals. In our conversations with administrators, teachers, parents and students, we learned that there is a wide range of opportunities to write across disciplines, within and outside the classroom. The "writing process" philosophy is embedded in the instructional strategies we observed at this level and the student-teacher and student-student conferring structure is evident in most classrooms. The high school leadership team prepared a schedule of classrooms visits that included Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, World Language, and English; these visits also represented writing instruction at Honors, College Preparatory (ACP, CP), and Advanced Placement levels. We were most impressed and delighted when teachers arrived at our interview space with copies of student work in writing! Not only did they share the assignments, explain their thinking and directly link the work to curriculum, but also they generously gave us copies to share with the rest of our team. The student work demonstrated the extent of the commitment to critical thinking and creativity: for example, close reading and pattern recognition in "Snow Falling on Cedars," researched based, persuasive, document-based analysis, shared inquiry in Google Docs, project-based learning across the curriculum, Italian, Spanish and French classes facilitated with a high percentage of the target language, concept maps, graphic organizers, links between English and Social Studies using "Animal Farm" and elements of propaganda. Rubrics specific to individual assignments, checklists, and narrative responses by teachers were evident. The team commends the inclusion of the "Freshman Foundations" course that

captured our interest because it is a marking period requirement for all incoming ninth graders. Its collaborative format is a shared critique of student papers that simultaneously teaches citation rules, sentence and paragraph structure, and authenticity. All of the students we met spoke about the value of this course as a refresher, an example of the kind of expectations that writing well assumes and they move on with a sense that they are prepared.

Further, our conversations with students consistently reflected an awareness of the emphasis on writing in most of their classes, a deep respect for their teachers, an interest in learning to edit their peers, the chance to reflect on their own learning. Student described the option of choosing literature, project focus, document analysis, and junior and senior year electives. Parents, too, described their awareness that their students were writing with more emphasis on critical thinking.

### **Response to Essential Questions, Commendations, and Suggestions for Further Exploration**

The Tri-State team concluded, after examining the artifacts, interviewing and observing teachers and students engaged within classrooms, that there is strong support and evidence-based decision making in place to develop critical and creative thinking skills within the writing program. Teachers and leaders showed positive collaborative spirit when discussing the future development of their writing programs and a strong commitment to support a common vision. Students at all levels demonstrated a thoughtful ability to speak about their writing as a process and appeared engaged in classrooms the team visited. In our conversations with teachers and administrators across the buildings, we consistently heard an enthusiastic desire to advance a cohesive district approach to writing instruction.

The district committed to the Performance Assessment Design Initiative (PADI), sponsored by the Tri-State Consortium, thus reinforcing the components of critical and creative thinking through performance assessment. This was evident in the strong support at the Central Office level and through the number of impressive performance assessment projects created by teachers involved in this work. It was not clear if all teachers and leaders saw the through line between thinking skills, the performance assessment initiative as an example of these skills, and the movement toward a process approach to writing instruction. Once the district has identified a clearly defined vision, the staff would benefit from seeing the connection between this vision and the writing instruction and assessment model that will support critical and creative thinking.

Middle school leaders and teachers expressed a desire to identify a common approach to writing instruction and the necessity to discuss the teaching and learning conditions that would support a successful implementation. The current middle school schedule was seen as an obstacle that might require further review and research of other feasible models. While middle schools and high schools lack the scheduling flexibility seen at the elementary level, it is conceivable that a process writing approach that includes a “workshop” model could be implemented at the middle level. If this direction is desired, the leadership team might engage teachers to collaborate with the leadership team to develop scheduling options that are responsive to the district’s writing goal, and also take into consideration the collaborative work and teaching talents evident in each of the schools.

The district asked the visiting team to consider the extent to which the current approach to teaching writing, K-12, uses a variety of assessment data to inform instruction. The assessment data in writing include a focus on prompt writing and assured performance based assessments include a written component. Previously, the district employed a computer-based writing assessment which has been discontinued this year. Rubrics are being used to assess writing, students have a role in the reflection process and many teachers spoke about students’ use of rubrics and checklists to assess writing. All district prompts are assessed using a common, district-created rubric. There is also an array of other rubrics and checklists in place in specific schools across the district.

This year, the writing scoring process included broader representation that brought the lens of special educators and teachers across content areas into the writing assessment process. This step was viewed favorably and enthusiastically for the collaborative effort and shared ownership it entailed. The use of the Smarter Balanced state assessment rubric might have been a logical choice given the issues encountered with previous writing assessments; it also allowed for collaborative discussions around calibration with teachers new to the writing prompt scoring process. All involved expressed the desire for more opportunities of this nature and for additional time to link student writing performance to instruction and intervention decisions.

Student-led conferences in grade eight are an example of a student-centered assessment experience that includes critical thinking, self-reflection and communication. This innovative practice is one that might be spotlighted and shared with teachers at other levels with the possibility of growing this model of student-centered self-reflection through the writing initiative’s next steps. District administrators discussed the need to strengthen the transition process through discussions about student performance on internal and external assessments. Further, the district might consider additional ways to strengthen the student transition process

by examining the various writing models in place at the different levels in terms of curriculum coherence. The use of student writing “totes “in elementary classrooms this year reflects the beginning of a promising practice that might lead to cross-grade and level teacher discussions using a protocol to examine the student writing contained in them. The elementary “totes” and the student-led parent teacher conferences provide examples of promising practices that support the district’s goal of creating thoughtful, creative learning environments.

Finally, the district asked the visiting team to consider the extent to which the current approach to the teaching of writing, K-12, includes the support of appropriate professional learning opportunities. The visiting team was impressed with the strides the district has made in the area of professional learning this year. The district has developed a culture and structure for adult learning that provides the conditions for teachers to engage in collaborative learning experiences that include both district-initiated sessions as well as teacher-initiated sessions. This commitment is evident in the use of “ cadre days “which are allocated to each building to support focused study of district, building and/or grade level goals. Other structures, such as Community of Practice, fosters improved communication and the sharing of curricular materials among faculty. There is strong evidence to suggest that this structure also encourages greater consistency in examining instructional approaches and student learning outcomes.

Further, the common faculty meetings at the middle schools are an example of district time used to bring teachers together to address a common teaching and learning need. This structure supports cross-building communication and collaboration that might allow for more sharing of innovative practices, assessment techniques and student work discussions. While the number of elementary schools might make such a similar practice unwieldy, identifying common writing initiative goals and committing to a certain amount of faculty meeting time at all levels would support a systemic approach to advancing the initiative.

Clearly, the use of reading specialists, program leaders, instructional leaders and department chairs organizes the district’s structure with dedicated roles within the teaching staff to support the writing initiative. The roles and responsibilities currently in place have served the district well and provide the opportunity to reimagine how these roles might help deepen teachers’ understanding of the art and science of writing instruction. In order for this to occur, the district might consider the needs within each building and try to link the literacy leadership role with specifically identified needs. The changes ahead might also mean that those in literacy leadership and administrative positions might benefit from professional learning opportunities of their own. Once a clear vision and plan has been created, the leadership team might reflect upon their own needs and how best to approach the capacity building work ahead.

A number of elementary teachers, the program leader, and a few building administrators have been supported in their participation in Teachers College Reading and Writing Institutes over the years. If the Reading and Writing Project workshop model is selected as the common instructional approach for a given level or levels, the leadership team might want to determine how to create a critical core of trained teachers who could serve informally as teacher leaders in this approach at the building level. The district shared the positive experience with Connecticut Writing Project consultants. Continued work with this group or another could further advance the writing initiative provided that all steps support a common district vision, which might take different forms in practice at different levels.

The Tri-State commends Trumbull for its thoughtful and timely essential questions. In our view, the staff is ready for the next level of work to nurture the writing initiative. The team recommends that the district vision include a clear link between the student learning that will be deepened through a learner-centered instructional approach, expanded assessment practices, and professional learning experiences. The district appears poised and eager to take these steps, and the visiting team experienced this commitment through our review of documents and time spent observing and interviewing administrators, teachers, students and parents. We found dedicated, highly professional teachers, at all levels, who are interested in their own professional growth in tandem with the continuous growth of their students. The team felt the warm welcome upon our arrival at the district office and greeting by teachers and administrators followed by the district presentation that even included support from the First Selectman.

Special thanks to Dr. Jonathan Budd and his Assistant, Claudia Konopka who created a seamless experience for the team. The particular attention to including Tri-State team members in an immersion experience at each school is an exemplar we can share with other districts. Our creature comforts were so well served, including chocolate snacks during the afternoon! We left Trumbull inspired by the progress already achieved in the teaching and learning of writing across all disciplines. Administrators and teachers unanimously support the district goal, are involved in understanding and implementing research-based practices, and we felt their pride in their accomplishments. In the final team debrief, we agreed that there is a considerable and purposeful shift in the district commitment to critical thinking and creativity for all students; the momentum is palpable, and we are all looking forward to our return.