



**Tri-State
Consortium**

**Hastings-on-Hudson School District
TRI-STATE VISIT 2016**

Student Engagement, November 16-18, 2016

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Tri-State Consortium

Hastings-on-Hudson School District TRI-STATE VISIT 2016 Student Engagement, November 16-18, 2016

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*“Students who are engaged in their work are energized by four goals—success, curiosity, originality, and satisfying relationships.”
(Strong, Silver, Robinson, Vol.53, Education Leadership)*

Narrative

The Hastings-on-Hudson School District invited a team of representatives from Tri-State Consortium member districts to benchmark its current focus on the constructs and strategies that define and identify active student engagement in the learning process, K-12, November 16-18 2016. Hastings-on-Hudson is a long-time, valued member of the Consortium, which is comprised of forty-seven school districts in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, and describes its mission as, *...a dynamic learning organization of public schools that values systems thinking as the foundation for continuous improvement. The Consortium assists its member districts in using quantitative and qualitative data to enhance student performance and to build a rigorous framework for planning, assessment and systemic change...*

As the Consortium enters its third decade, our core beliefs remain focused on authentic, interdisciplinary teaching and learning and purposeful assessment practices that are directly linked to optimal student performance. Working together as critical friends, we spent three days in the district, examining digital evidence prepared to focus and guide our thinking, visiting all buildings, observing students in their classrooms, attending individual teacher presentations designed to demonstrate student engagement at all levels, and interviewing teachers, administrators, students, parents and Board of Education members. The goal of the Tri-State visit team is to affirm and confirm Hastings’ efforts to deepen student learning, to grow the capacity of students to “...grapple with content, ...explain their thinking...and reflect and provide feedback...” through intellectual, social, physical engagement, with support from “meaningfully embedded” technology.

When we arrived on the first day, student ambassadors greeted and escorted us to the Lecture Room in the Farragut Complex where we were based for the duration of the visit. Clearly, Hastings' students are notably proud of their school and teachers; their ease and interest in this event set the tone for the warm, student-centered environment evident throughout our visit. Superintendent Roy Montesano; Jeremy Luft, Director of Curriculum & instruction; and the Hastings Tri-State Steering Committee, represented by building principals, assistant principals, and instructional leaders, welcomed us. The Tri-State team was immediately impressed by the attention to detail, organization, and scheduled building-representative teacher demonstrations, critical elements directly aligned with the district's initiative.

To guide us in our consideration of the district's Essential Questions, Jeremy Luft's overview, illustrated by a graphic descriptor, a wheel, placed "Student Engagement" and the Essential Questions at the center, and all links to the district's research-based decisions directly connected: growth mindset, the issue of compliance vs. engagement, increased inclusion of student voices, attention to national surveys about student engagement, and personalized learning. In addition, a grid divided the four student engagement indicators with subsets that listed specific student expectations for intellectual, social, and physical engagement. The technology indicator described the support for students that included collaboration, differentiation, and the importance of technology when it is "meaningfully embedded" in lesson design. Dr. Luft further described the district process of narrowing the focus of the initiative to four compatible topics: "Observable Traits", "Teacher-Student Buy-in", "Across K-12 Classrooms", and "Meaningful for Hastings". All of the evidence linked to the initiative was accessible on the SCHED app and shared with the team. This was a paperless, environmentally sensitive way to catalogue evidence that will remain available to the district, and included a detailed schedule of individual and group teacher presentations, observation visits to classrooms, as well as interviews with staff, parents, students and Board of Education.

Prior to our arrival, the district Steering Committee drafted Essential Questions that are designed to guide the team's thinking and focus, as well as providing the framework for the

National School Reform Faculty Descriptive Consultancy that occurs on the second day. The format of the Consultancy unfolds in a specific and purposeful conversation between district representatives and the Tri-State team and involves further clarification of practices and opportunities to describe the steps ahead to support future planning linked to the student engagement initiative throughout the district. The visiting team's charge, over the three-day visit, was to analyze the evidence provided, ask clarifying and probing questions, and to investigate in order to answer the essential questions. For example, technology is used to increase student engagement and the Learner-Activated Technology-Infused Classroom (LACTIC) parameters include a definition of engagement, as well as the use of technology, when appropriate to increase engagement. Team comments on this district "invitation" for professional learning will be found in several sections.

The district's Essential Questions are:

- *To what degree do students in the Hastings-on-Hudson school district demonstrate that they are engaged in their learning?*
- *To what degree does the Hastings-on-Hudson school district integrate technology in meaningful ways to support student engagement?*
- *To what extent do faculty, students, and parents within the Hastings-on-Hudson school district share a common understanding of what student engagement is within our classrooms?*

Essential Question #1:

To what degree do students in the Hastings-on-Hudson school district demonstrate that they are engaged in their learning?

This question that the district posed to the Tri-State team is a significant one, and it resonated immediately with the visiting team because of its relevance and familiarity in our home districts. In the district's process of defining and identifying the philosophy, implementation, and concomitant shifts in classroom instructional strategies that demonstrate student engagement, there was considerable time spent in research-based discussion. The results of the district's inquiry over the last two years resulted in the decision to divide evidence of student engagement into a matrix referred to earlier in this narrative. This matrix is visible across all buildings and is posted on the district website so that it is available to the public.

In our conversations with students, they referred to the Student Engagement Indicators document and described individual classroom discussions about the components of each section. Over the past five years, the district has spent time and resources training interested teachers in the Learner-Activated Technology-Infused Classroom Methods. The team observed both LATI and non-LATI classrooms; we were extremely impressed with the level of student comfort with LATI; they are encouraged to make decisions that directly impact their own learning path, no matter the grade level. Although a LATI curricula is a work-in-progress, close attention to students' social-emotional learning is a time-honored tradition in the Hastings school system.

The team was warmly welcomed at Hillside Elementary School, and it was clear that the school is regarded as a special place for students and teachers. The team visited classes across all grades and subject areas observing students engaged in their typical instructional environment, met with parents, teachers, and small groups of students to help us measure student engagement. Across the board, the team noted evidence of social, emotional, and physical engagement encouraged by the Hillside faculty. We observed classrooms that allowed alternate seating arrangements for students who worked with partners on a student-selected task. The instructional dynamics in many classrooms employed student choice strategies including menus, grouping strategies, and collaboration in small teams. Teachers also encouraged student scheduling, asking them to prioritize and manage their learning during the

school day. Intellectual engagement was most clearly evidenced in the integration of student choice. This extended to the Makerspace and after school Maker Club where students are able to use design challenges and gizmos, gadgets and “Little bits” to problem solve and create. The team saw several classrooms that also employed Expert boards where students sign up to help others in areas in which they felt skilled and knowledgeable. Several classrooms also used WIN (What I Need) boards to prompt student self-reflection and advocacy for his/her own learning.

The Farragut Middle School is an open, friendly, and energetic space where mid-age students have a sense of their own growth and the continued, admirable support of their teachers. We were immediately impressed with the changes made since our last visit through block scheduling and the renewed focus on the design of interdisciplinary projects. The student-centered environment in the middle school is evidenced in the lively, curious students who value the freedom of choice and the gift of time to complete a task. In particular, the teacher demonstrations of projects in process with students across the disciplines were distinguished by depth of understanding, higher order critical thinking expectations, and continuous support available to think through multi-tier assignment tasks made possible with the block schedule. Teachers commented that students “arrive with a goal”, they develop strategies to fit self-selected projects, and in their words, students arrive at “the coolest things”! The visit team visited a variety of grades 5-8 classrooms across disciplines observing students involved in group, pair, and conference discussion. Lead teachers described the shift to the tenets of student engagement in their courses, and they spoke about the direct effect on their own professional growth. Specifically, one course highlighted the ways in which an interdisciplinary approach is used to increase student (and teacher) intellectual engagement. A presentation by the Physical Education Department highlighted ways in which they seek to engage students not only physically and socially but also intellectually, by established opportunities for students to assume leadership in their learning. The LACTIC (Learner-Active, Technology Infused Classroom) was first introduced at the middle school level a few years ago. Documents were displayed in the classroom and students described their delight with a Rube Goldberg Project in the STEM classroom. Art and Science have also collaborated in STEM activities. Block scheduling

at the middle school has allowed teachers the ability to dive deeply into engagement with students by planning meaningful activities for students to grapple with during longer class periods. Grade 5 and 6 teachers have been trained in Mindfulness techniques in order to address the social and emotional needs of students to increase engagement. It was noted that there was hope to expand this into the 7th and 8th grade as well.

Hastings High School has traditionally supported teacher autonomy and the talented staff reflects the innovative thinking and camaraderie that results when the environment is open, ideas and methodology are shared, and students are engaged in thoughtful activities. We observed students problem-solving in an anthropology class, arriving at multiple perspectives when offered the choice to comply or to engage. Certainly, rubrics are used in many courses, including a citizenship rubric and a habits of mind rubric. In AP English, students were very enthusiastic and involved in a semiotics lesson posed as an ancillary way to deepen understanding of the ways that “signs” and symbols make meaning in all societies, and in this instance, to Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter the text in discussion. Further, it was clear that these students are accustomed to working together, analyzing, synthesizing, and deciding about selected literature. The Brown University Choice Program is integrated in English and Social Studies classrooms, an online resource that offers a wide range of challenging experiences in research and contemporary commentary. Advanced Geology, a high school elective, assigns a self-reflection journal that asks students to think about “what they actually know”, to center their inquiry by adhering to the course timeline, independently researching, and completing the requirements for SUNY Oneonta credit.

Speaking with high school teachers we learned that student engagement is perceived to always have been a key factor in their classrooms, but it has been enhanced by the specific attention to this initiative. The monthly late start time schedule is valued and appreciated by the staff. The team suggests that including a Looking at Student Work (LASW) protocol in this time slot can inform instructional practice and provide qualitative data linked to student work. Teachers also commented on being facilitators, intentional in encouraging multiple perspectives of

understanding and questioning material. The integration of technology in the high school classrooms has increased and opened the space for differentiation, critical thinking, and opportunities for teachers to comment in real time.

Overall, the range of research and decisions the district has investigated in order to fully engage its students impressed the team. Indeed, excellent instruction is occurring in the district that appears to engage students intellectually, socially, as well as physically. Part of the next phase of the work will be to determine which data are used to examine and measure student engagement. The district might consider the use of learning walks or walkthroughs (a practice the district's administrators mentioned throughout our visit) that are focused on student engagement. The use of Depth of Knowledge (Webb) or similar measurement tools might aid in this process. As the district looks at curriculum design models such as UbD (Understanding by Design) building units around essential questions and enduring understandings might be a structure to encourage engagement and alignment.

Commendations:

- The team noted high levels of social engagement and physical engagement at all levels of the district. There were multiple examples of collaboration and student choice across disciplines. In our interviews with students, they made clear to us that they perceive being engaged in their learning.
- The district has invested time and resources into training teachers in the LATIC method that encourages engagement across the district- identified domains. The district reported that 80% of teachers at the middle school are LATI trained.
- The district has developed rubrics for student behavior in some subject areas on some grade levels.
- We saw evidence of meaningful student engagement at all grade levels and in all subject areas.

- There is a significant, positive difference in the “feel” of the district since our last visit. Our sense is that the emphasis on student engagement has contributed to that shift.

Recommendations:

- Teachers expressed interest in spending time in each other’s classes at the next level of work on engagement. Inter-visitations would be helpful in providing feedback between staff members in a non-evaluative way.
- As the district dives deeper into intellectual engagement indicator, a common understanding of what “grappling” connotes and denotes might anchor student choices.
- As the district continues to explore UbD to frame its curricula, it might consider the role of essential questions in intellectual engagement.
- As the district invitation to teacher training in LATI continues, we recommend the district consider the paths of experiences that students have had through the grades. For example, the district might consider the experience of a child who goes from LATI to non-LATI classrooms.
- Students and parents describe teacher selection as an important part of the child’s experience. Is there a way the district could standardize practices across a grade level so that students have similar experiences?
- As initiatives take hold, district norms and structures need to change in order to create an environment for those changes to take root. For example, is student engagement included on the district’s report cards? Do grading practices take student engagement into account? And, in order to support the good work already occurring, we recommend that the district’s administrators emphasize student engagement in their written observations and evaluations of staff members.
- We greatly enjoyed our conversations with HOH’s wonderful students. We suggest that engaging student voice in assessing the direction and effectiveness of the district’s emphasis on student engagement could be helpful.

- We were so impressed with the level of student engagement we witnessed in the high school's higher-level courses, and we were left wondering whether the same level of rigor exists in Regents level courses. This is a question we think the district might explore.
- We recommend that the district think about how it will gather evidence of student engagement: there is much evidence in classroom every day – how can the district capture that evidence?

Essential Questions #2: *To what degree does the Hastings-on-Hudson school district integrate technology in meaningful ways to support student engagement?*

Students in Hastings have access to technology to support their learning throughout their K-12 experience. The Tri-State team witnessed technology being used in ways that allowed for skill practice, personalized learning, problem solving and collaboration among students. The team saw iPads and Chromebooks at the elementary level. At the middle school teachers have Chromebook carts positioned in each classroom. At the High School there seemed to be a combination of students bringing their own technology and technology purchased by the school district. Google seemed to be the preferred platform for the school district.

The team wondered how LATI and the roll out of technology are being narrated for the community, as some members of the community are concerned about appropriate use of technology in the school setting. Some parents we spoke with noted that they were concerned about the amount of screen time their children experienced in the course of the day. The name LATI - learner activated, technology-infused - may inadvertently cause members of the community to think that technology is used all of the time or that students are on devices all day in all classes. Emphatically, that was not what the Tri-State team observed in the classrooms we visited across the buildings. The team concluded that technology integration is deliberate and intentional and designed to support instruction in the classroom in ways consistent with appropriate technology use in most of the districts in the Consortium. In order

to make the community more aware of instructional practices involving technology, the team recommends continued communication to parents about how technology balances the classroom activities in each school.

In June, Hillside Elementary School invited parents to an information session in the evening to outline the role of technology in a LATI classroom. The team learned that all classroom teachers have not been trained in the method, nor is LATI present in every elementary or middle school classroom. When the team debriefed, we suggested that this juncture is the ideal time to review and revise communication with the parent and larger community. We recommend that short videos of students at work using technology in deliberate, precise ways...to research, plan with a group, and search for consensus on a project through collaboration. Even with all of those questions, the team observed students as actively engaged in their learning. Computers are available in the 21st Century classroom, but they are not diversions. Rather, students understand when the computer will be efficient to find information, and throughout the buildings, we observed that all “screen time” seemed to be directly related to lesson plans and clearly thought out by the teachers who infused the technology. Smartboards were used when appropriate with several classes at the elementary school using technology to reinforce skills.

At the middle school level the team saw Discovery Tech Books in action in a sixth-grade world history class. Students were focused, working independently at their own pace with the assigned text. This freed up the teacher to meet with small groups and to probe student knowledge while other students were engaged in learning at their own level. Technology was also used in the creation of Rube Goldberg machines. Students practiced their speaking skills and then completed a trial of their machines while recording the event using iPads. At the high school students used their own devices, notetaking, sharing ideas and insights with classmates, moving through the phases of preparation essential to writing and revising assignments.

Commendations:

- The district is commended for integrating digital citizenship lessons to reinforce safe and appropriate use of technology.
- Technology integration appears to occur naturally and purposefully. We were impressed with the way in which technology is unobtrusively supporting student learning.
- Instructional tasks using technology allow for skill practice as well as individualization and personalized learning. Smartboards engage students in the classroom- they are interactive and projected.
- Most teachers expressed support for the technology they are able to use with their students, and perceive that it is helping students to become more independent learners.

Recommendations:

- Consider how families are included in the communication of technology use at all levels. Consider whether or not standards concerning the use of technology might be placed on the website for parents.
- Include the voices of the staff and students to collaborate about the most effective pathways to be infused technology into classrooms and curriculum.
- Continue to evaluate the impact of Digital Citizenship lessons for all students k-12.
- Most high schools are siloed by department (content area), and this is the case in HOH. We wondered if greater emphasis on technology in interdisciplinary work might break down some of those traditional barriers.

Essential Question #3: *To what extent do faculty, students, and parents within the Hastings-on-Hudson school district share a common understanding of what student engagement is within our classrooms?*

The faculty, students and parents in Hastings' are in an exciting phase of their work as they begin to collaborate to develop a shared understanding of what the indicators of student

engagement are today and how they envision them in the future. The development of the student engagement matrix is a descriptor that contains key elements that point to specific student/teacher behaviors. The visiting team sensed that the document be annotated for parents and the larger community. Publication of the matrix and extended explication of the indicators might be an appropriate step with the intent that all stakeholders are informed. Similar to our recommendation above to communicate to the community what appropriate technology looks like in elementary, middle and high school classes, we would make the same recommendation for making the Student Engagement rubric come to life for the community. Within the rubric, there seems to be an aligned understanding among teachers and administrators in the areas of physical engagement and social engagement because many of the of the supporting details in each category are accessible.

We would recommend that the district consider more concentration on defining the supporting details in the intellectual engagement category. Defining specifically selected words like “grapple” would help set expectations for all classrooms, grade levels and schools. In the team’s interviews with students, some students recognized the matrix and spoke about “beginning of the year” lessons about student engagement. We would recommend that this work continue to be emphasized for the students throughout the year. In addition, since it is clear that students in Hastings have been empowered to have a voice in their learning, the district might consider how they might be involved in the process of making the rubric come to life.

Teacher interviews throughout our visit showed how important student engagement is to the teachers in the district. In the many presentations (25+) offered in our time in the district, teachers described the positive changes in instructional practice when there is the sense of student/teacher equity in choice and project development. Teachers proudly shared how they used the idea of engagement of students in all schools in the Hastings district. One specific example is how special education students have been included in the development of their IEPs.

Commendations:

- The creation of the engagement matrix that was shared with staff and some students is a solid foundation as the district moves forward.
- Teachers genuinely want their students to be engaged and are open to ways of increasing engagement.
- There are ample structures in place in the district to facilitate dialogue about engagement, shared planning, monthly early release time, coaches and consultants to support the initiative.

Recommendations:

- Consider focused learning walks that include teachers, as the district examines student engagement and moves to the next phase of work.
- Consider how families are included in the process of implementing student engagement with videos and describers of student involvement.
- Continue to consider engagement through interdisciplinary work.
- Consider facilitating focus groups of students and staff during the next phase of the work.
- We suggest that the district think about the difference between a district-wide initiative and an invitation. There is always a fine line between consistency and standardization when initiatives are introduced – it would be helpful for the district to make its expectations of teacher participation clearer.
- Many members of the staff told us that they understand and support the emphasis on student engagement, and would appreciate more time to meet with colleagues – by grade, department and/or school – to discuss ways to embed it more in their work.
- We recommend that the district engage the staff in an examination of the programs and instructional strategies used by the teachers in order to determine the extent to which these programs and instructional strategies support student engagement.

- We sensed that the teachers are poised to learn even more about student engagement. Our suggestion is that the district capitalizes on this support by ensuring that the staff has input on revisions to the 4-quadrant chart. If the district is asking the teachers to generate greater engagement with their students, then the district must generate greater engagement with its staff.
- Although we perceive that there is a common understanding of student engagement among the teachers and administrators, there does not appear to be a common approach to implementation. That's neither positive nor negative – unless the district is seeking common implementation. This is a question worth discussing. We wondered if the district might consider the development of assured experiences as a through line that pulls together the different forms of engagement.

Finally, our thanks to the Steering Committee whose preparation for our arrival was thorough and so appreciated. Thanks to Jeremy Luft for the seamless schedule that had us very busy moving through the day, ensuring that we would experience the implementation of this initiative in varied and specific ways. Our creature comforts were terrific, food, water, snacks that kept us well-fed and fueled with energy. It's always exciting to observe a system that selects an initiative that makes sense to the staff and contributes directly to their own professional growth. The team concluded that student engagement is high on the commitment list of all the professionals, who are dedicated to guiding student growth, academically and socially. The district should feel justifiably proud of the work that has occurred – it has made a difference.