



**Tri-State
Consortium**

FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

TRI-STATE VISIT 2013

Writing, 6-8 | December 4, 5, 6



Tri-State Consortium

FAIRFIELD – CONNECTICUT – TRI-STATE VISIT 2013

Writing: Middle Schools (3)

December 4, 5, 6, 2013

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Narrative

“The mission of the Fairfield Public Schools is to inspire students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be life-long learners, responsible citizens and successful participants in an ever-changing global society by providing, in a partnership with families and community, a comprehensive, rigorous educational program.”

The Fairfield Public Schools invited a Tri-State Consortium visit team to review the Grades 6-8, writing program, in its three middle schools: Fairfield Woods, Tomlinson, and Roger Ludlow, on December 4-6, 2013. The Tri-State Consortium’s mission statement, describes “...a learning organization devoted to assisting its member districts in using student performance data to develop a rigorous framework for systemic planning, assessment, and continuous improvement”. Working together as critical friends, the team, composed of teachers, school-level administrators, and district-level administrators, spent three days examining documents prepared as evidence of the writing program, interviewing administrators, teachers, parents, and students, and observing classroom instruction related to English language arts writing in the middle schools.

The goal of the visit team is to affirm and confirm the district’s efforts toward continuous improvement of student achievement results and the strength of the professional learning community. Through the examination of student work samples, curriculum documents, district and building initiatives, representative district publications, and data, both quantitative and qualitative, the visit team considered the Fairfield Public Schools’ over-arching question– ***What is the writing life of a Fairfield middle school student?*** –these five questions guided the analysis:

- To what extent does the current approach to the teaching of writing 6-8 present evidence of research-based instructional strategies that enable the district’s students to build capacity for creative and critical thinking skills?
- To what extent does the district’s 6-8 writing program teach critical and reflective thinking and develop authentic writers who can write effectively for a variety of purposes, and not just for the “next level”?
- To what degree is the district meeting its goal of balancing high standards of achievement with the educational needs of diverse learners, providing challenging, yet differentiated, writing instruction and opportunities 6-8?
- To what extent does the district use varied data to inform instruction for all 6-8 learners in the district?
- To what extent does the district’s current use of portfolios communicate levels of student performance?

The visit team was impressed by the warm welcome and hospitality in Roger Ludlow, where we were based throughout the visit. Our first day included a detailed, cogent presentation by John

Chiappetta, 6-12 Curriculum Leader for English/Language Arts and Reading, who situated Fairfield's middle school writing program into the larger district, state, and national contexts. Mr. Chiappetta, supported by the Language Arts Specialists in each of the middle schools, organized a visit that engaged the Tri-State Consortium team members in the analysis of student writing, conversations with students, teachers, parents, and administrators, and observations of all grades 6-8 language arts classes in Fairfield's three middle schools.

The Fairfield Public Schools have, among other resources, enthusiastic students, motivated parents, dedicated teachers, and outstanding leaders for the language arts. Fairfield should be proud of the writing being accomplished by its students at all grades at all middle schools; our suggestions below are intended to provide an objective perspective about how the district's approach to teaching writing could be refined, developed, and extended even further in the near future.

Essential Questions

The simple answer to the district's over-arching question – *What is the writing life of a Fairfield middle school student?* – is that it is rich, authentic, metacognitive, and rewarding. Students write in various genres and for various purposes, and they have sustained frequent opportunities to engage their minds, hearts, and souls in writing. For middle school students, growing in so many intellectual, emotional, and social ways, this writing life is clearly beneficial. Further details follow in regard to each of the five questions guiding the visit team's analysis.

During the self-study process that preceded this Tri-State evaluation, the school district developed five guiding questions to focus its preparation and to guide the visit team in its examination of the 6-8 writing program:

Essential Question #1:

To what extent does the current approach to the teaching of writing 6-8 present evidence of research-based instructional strategies that enable the district's students to build capacity for creative and critical thinking skills?

At the 6-8 level, the district has adopted a workshop model centered on developing students as writers in a variety of genres meaningfully integrated with the reading students are doing in their language arts classes. Much research validates this model for the growth of students in seeing themselves as writers, assessing their strengths and need areas as writers, setting short-term and long-term improvement goals, reflecting metacognitively on each piece of writing they produce, and conferencing with their teacher and their peers toward both creative and critical thinking ends.

Middle school student writers at work in Fairfield produce a variety of writing consistent with the intent of the workshop model. Enthusiastic students reported to the visit team about their writing process, motivation to work hard on their writing, and clear appreciation for their growth as writers over time; the students cited several specific writing tasks they recalled

meaningfully, as well as their general sense that they had ownership over various elements of the writing process in their language arts classes.

The middle school language arts teachers also described a commitment to the workshop model, which allows them to meet students' differentiated needs as readers and writers. The teachers were also aware of research-based instructional strategies to support the implementation of the workshop model.

At the same time, however, not all teachers appeared to share or implement uniform understandings of the core values of the workshop model to be implemented in Fairfield. For example, since the current schedule for grades 7-8 combines reading and writing into a relatively brief language arts period, the teachers reported concerns about the extent to which they could adequately conference with all students, engage all students in deep revision of writing. Different teachers addressed their concerns in different ways, which in some cases may be creating a lapse in fidelity to the workshop model in practice. The district may consider the value of both revisiting the core philosophical elements of the workshop model and clarifying how those elements will be operationally implemented at the various middle school grade levels. The Tri-State team encourages the district to facilitate shared understandings through collaborative conversations among all teachers in regard to both philosophical elements and operational implementation.

It is, of course, possible that certain operational structures may interfere with the workshop model. One example may be the relatively brief language arts period for grades 7-8; another example may be the inclusion of world language within the grade 6 language arts block, which the visit team observed to be disruptive to the continuity of the language arts reading and writing process, particularly when the world language instruction is scheduled during the middle of the block. The clear value of the writing (and reading) workshop model may require conversations about how structures such as these two examples might be modified to provide stronger operational fidelity for the philosophical elements of the workshop model.

It may also be important to examine how the assignment of teachers at the grade 6 level can best support the workshop model. Currently, all grade 6 teachers teach language arts, as well as one (or more) other subject(s). This practice leads to individuals with a wide variety of background expertise teaching a critical subject – language arts – within a model – the workshop model – that necessitates strong initial and ongoing professional development. Some grade 6 teachers expressed a sense of hesitation in terms of teaching language arts. If the district continues this staffing model, additional professional development opportunities for grade 6 teachers centered on the writing (and reading) workshop model may well be necessary; however, since grade 6 teachers in this model are also responsible for teaching other core subjects, an alternate grade 6 staffing model would support efforts for more frequent and focused professional development opportunities.

Essential Question #2:

To what extent does the district’s 6-8 writing program teach critical and reflective thinking and develop authentic writers who can write effectively for a variety of purposes, and not just for the “next level”?

As discussed above, the district’s 6-8 writing program is founded on a model of critical and reflective thinking; a core part is authenticity. The middle school language arts teachers make a clear, conscious, and productive effort toward these aims. Students, as noted above, see themselves as writers who get to make decisions about various aspects of the writing process. Additionally, students and parents reported growth in their students’ writing ability over time.

The use of writer’s notebooks, observed in classrooms a core part and discussed by students in interviews, is a clear element of this writing process in which each writing task is part of a broader picture, not simply a means to a short-term, discrete end. Students collect their writing in writing portfolios, which are in the process of migrating to an electronic platform, and in many classrooms students provide evidence in their portfolios of metacognition, describing themselves as writers. For each student to ultimately see himself or herself as a writer who has a writing life of energy, passion, and motivation – not just one motivated by teachers and tasks – the importance of authenticity and metacognition cannot be underestimated. With these goals in mind, ongoing professional development for all teachers of language arts is important.

In most districts, the transition between grade 8 and grade 9 is a major one, and can provide both opportunities and challenges. In terms of each Fairfield’s student’s writing life, the opportunity is in place to help each student writer see how his or her developed engagement, motivation, metacognition, can be energized toward goals and tasks that look at least slightly different by the high school level. Parents expressed some concern to the visit team regarding students’ writing preparation for the high school grades given the workshop model focus of the middle school grades. By clarifying the philosophical and operational elements of the workshop model, sharing the information with stakeholders, including parents and high school teachers, it will be obvious that writing in grades 6-8 language arts can, indeed, bridge effectively to the writing in grades 9-12 English. Additionally, perhaps shared, professional development for teachers on each side of the grades 8-9 transition may be beneficial.

We think that the creation of common assessments, preferably authentic, performance-based assessments, would enable the district to monitor student progress in writing, particularly relating to the variety of purposes the district has identified. A district set of rubrics would be helpful as well, especially to those teachers in other subject areas. Finally, it would be useful for the district to engage the faculty in developing a definition of authenticity as it relates to writing ... so all staff, not just those teaching English Language Arts, will know it when they see it.

Essential Question #3:

To what degree is the district meeting its goal of balancing high standards of achievement with the educational needs of diverse learners, providing challenging, yet differentiated, writing instruction and opportunities 6-8?

Balancing high standards of achievement for all students, while providing the appropriate levels of differentiation and support, has been an ongoing goal of the Fairfield Public Schools. In the district's opening presentation, the visit team was informed that the district de-leveled middle school language arts classes in favor of the current heterogeneous approach to teaching reading and writing. The district is commended for de-leveling these classes, and by doing so, raising the expectations of achievement for all students in writing.

Parent and student groups reported to the visit team that student writing needs were being met to differing degrees. Discussions with students at the seventh and eighth grade levels suggested that teachers spend more time conferencing with students who need more support. Some high-achieving students indicated that they rely more on peer feedback when their teacher does not have enough time to conference with them. Interestingly, at the sixth grade level, where there is a double block of language arts, there was more evidence to suggest that teachers were able to conference more frequently with all students. The discrepancy between grades may be due, once again, to the structural constraints of a single versus double block structure.

To support the implementation of a differentiated 6-8 writing program, the district has dedicated a Language Arts Specialist (LAS) to each building with the intent of supporting teachers with their writing (and reading) instruction. These positions serve as valuable resources for the district to achieve its stated goal. Through interviews with language arts teachers and each LAS, the visit team learned that these positions function differently in each building due to the amount of time required for them to conduct educational testing for SRBI, and perhaps due to differing expectations for use of their time by each school. Teachers reported that they would like to have greater access to their LAS to support lesson planning and writing instruction as they view them as valuable resources.

In light of the feedback from teachers, the district may want to review and update the role and responsibilities of the LAS to reflect the needs of the system. If the district would like to dedicate the time and expertise of the LAS to support instructional coaching with the workshop model, then it may need to determine how other positions may be better suited to address the need to conduct SRBI testing. With more time for coaching, the LAS would have flexibility to be in classes to conduct demonstration lessons for teachers, provide them with non-evaluative feedback on their lessons, and facilitate regularly scheduled common planning meetings within the school day.

Essential Question #4:

To what extent does the district use varied data to inform instruction for all 6-8 learners in the district?

The visit team learned that the Superintendent of Schools has established a vision for implementing data teams throughout the district to analyze student performance data and employ it to inform instruction. The three middle schools include many promising practices with respect to using varied sources of writing data to inform instruction. Benchmark assessments and writing prompts have been established within the curriculum and serve as potential sources of data. In addition, there is a tremendous repository of writing housed in the student writing portfolios that may serve as the basis for horizontal and vertical teams to examine student work and have rich discussions regarding student learning.

However, there appears to be a need for a more systematic and systemic approach to data teams across the middle schools. Each school looks to be in different places in terms of implementation based on the visit team's conversations with educators in the middle schools. Perhaps, it would be helpful if the district were to review the purpose of the data teams with teachers and solicit their feedback regarding the process that has been in place. This may be an opportune time to do so considering that building level and central office leadership overseeing the middle schools has turned over significantly in recent years. Having clear protocols for meetings, such as looking at student work guidelines, as well as a shared understanding of how the data teams will evaluate their overall effectiveness will increase the likelihood that the process will yield desired results going forward.

The visit team also wondered about the specific data being analyzed – do these data speak to the key questions of concern to the teachers? If not, the team wondered if those questions could be surfaced so the district might begin to think about ways to generate data relevant to those questions.

Additionally, students are identified for honors placement during the transition from eighth to ninth grade. In light of the district's goal to employ varied data to inform decision-making, it would be beneficial to examine the honors placement criteria for ninth grade English to determine to what extent writing data is considered in the process. Feedback from teachers regarding the transition process from grade five to six was very positive. Many sixth grade teachers indicated that students, in general, were well prepared in writing when they entered middle school.

Essential Question #5:

To what extent does the district's current use of portfolios communicate levels of student performance?

For several years, the district has had in place a writing portfolio process at the middle school level. The visit committee reviewed sample student portfolios and conducted interviews with students, teachers, and parents. The portfolio consists of a collection of student writing, including a valuable student metacognitive piece in which students reflect on their progress as writers.

It is clear that there is a high level of commitment to the portfolio process as evidenced by student and teacher interviews and parent feedback. When speaking to students, they expressed pride in their writing portfolios and discussed going back to look at old writing pieces to track their growth. Teachers also valued the portfolios as a means for demonstrating student progress in writing over the course of the year. However, parents expressed concern that they did not see the writing portfolio until the end of the year. Perhaps, the district's transition to electronic portfolios (with Google docs) will offer teachers and parents more frequent opportunities to view the portfolio and review student progress in writing in grades 6-8.

While there is a strong foundation for employing portfolios within each grade, a formal plan is not yet in place to communicate levels of student performance from year to year. Teachers in receiving grades, including ninth grade teachers, indicated that they rarely review the folders at the beginning of the school year to inform their planning. It is interesting to note that students assume their portfolios are read by their receiving teacher when they move on to the next grade. Occasionally, teachers may have a question about a student's past performance which prompts them to go back and examine the folder, but there is no formal process for receiving teachers to examine results upon receiving the portfolios.

The district may want to consider reviewing the purpose of the portfolio and including teachers in the development of a plan for the communication of levels of student performance within and between grade levels. As mentioned above, the portfolio data may offer the district a rich source of information to be discussed at data team meetings and for professional development purposes.

Summary

The Fairfield Public Schools should be proud of their student writers and the ways in which they are developing. At the middle school level – the focus of this visit team's study – student writers are reflecting on important narrative moments in their lives, analyzing literary elements in their reading, presenting research on current events and topics, and metacognitively reflecting on their strengths and future goal areas. These are students for whom writing clearly makes a

difference, and Fairfield's ongoing interest in extending its fine work even further is to be commended.

We recommend that the district consider ways to generate broader teacher ownership of the approach to writing. The staff is interested in becoming more engaged in these decisions, and they have productive ideas that can help move the writing program forward. The timing for greater involvement is propitious because the Common Core standards are on the horizon and will affect both curriculum and instruction.

Finally, the Tri-State team thanks John Chiappetta, Curriculum Leader, Grades 6-12, and the Steering Committee for the thoughtful planning of this consultancy. The Roger Ludlow Middle School staff was most attentive to our needs; principals and teachers in all three schools were receptive and welcoming. On the final day of our visit, we facilitated a conversation between members of our team and representatives from Fairfield's three middle schools. This conversation was guided by a protocol designed by the National School Reform Faculty; it is a collegial exchange of our impressions and questions, helps to clarify areas that we identify as needing more detailed information, and is a final opportunity to share our esteem and gratitude to Fairfield for the careful preparation, reception, and highly professional dialogues.