



**Tri-State  
Consortium**

**Eastchester Union Free School District**  
**TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2018**

Homework Practices, March 14-16, 2018

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## Tri-State Consortium

### Eastchester Union Free School District TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2018

#### Homework Practices, March 14-16, 2018

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***“It is the mission of the Eastchester Public Schools to provide a quality education in a safe, stable, and secure environment that fosters mutual respect, promotes the uniqueness of the individual, provides opportunities for student successes, and guides all students intellectually, emotionally, physically and socially.”***

(Eastchester School District Mission Statement)

The Eastchester School district invited a team of educators from member districts in the Tri-State Consortium to explore and analyze its current homework practices, K-12, with the intent of developing a framework of research-based, best practices districtwide. Eastchester joined the Tri-State Consortium in 2015, and this March 14-16, 2018 Consultancy was the district’s second; the Technology, K-12 study was completed in 2016.

The Tri-State Consortium mission describes, “...a dynamic learning organization of public school districts 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. Collaborating as colleagues and critical friends, Consortium members apply the standards of the Tri-State model to benchmark member district’s project in advancing teaching and learning.” As the Tri-State Consortium enters its third decade, our core beliefs remain focused on authentic and relevant teaching and learning and purposeful assessment practices that are directly linked to optimal student performance. The Tri-State Consortium is devoted to the analysis of multiple forms of qualitative and quantitative data to advance instructional practices and programs.

Superintendent, Dr. Walter R. Moran III, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Dr. Scott J. Wynne, and district leaders welcomed us in the newly created STEM Room at Anne Hutchinson Elementary School. Dr. Wynne outlined the homework review process that began in the winter, 2017, with a joint PTA and district survey of parents, faculty, and students asking for responses to questions about the purpose of homework, the attributes of quality homework, stressors linked to homework expectations, and the time that should be allotted. At the close of the academic year, 2017, the district’s administrative retreat allowed time to review and refine current guiding concepts related to homework and to align the goals of the anticipated Tri-State consultancy with the district mission statement and graduation goals. Dr. Wynne included the results of this survey in the artifacts collected as evidence for

the Tri-State team. We noted that the survey identified two areas of high need for their school: student stress and homework practices. The district decided that its Wellness Committee would examine the student stress issue and the homework practices issues would be addressed through the Tri-State consultancy and subsequent action plans.

Throughout Dr. Wynne’s thoughtful presentation, it became clear to the team that the Eastchester School District is committed to high standards of excellence for its students, and provides a curriculum that is rigorous, inclusive, and age appropriate. During this presentation, the team learned of the research that the district completed in preparation for the visit. This included an administrative retreat with the focus on homework practices and a book study, *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, (Vatterott, Cathy, ASCD 2016).

Through this process of study and discourse, the district synthesized its beliefs and practices and created a bipartite document, two columns divided by the attributes of the “Current Homework Ideology” and a “Future homework ideology”. The team commends the district on the thorough and thoughtful process to identify and clarify the existing ideology and to project a vision of a future ideology more closely aligned with current research. Although the district leaders acknowledged that teachers have the autonomy to determine what quality homework is and to assign appropriate homework, the focus on purposeful, interesting, and engaging homework is the desired outcome of our study.

Dr. Wynne’s welcome letter, sent to the team on March 11, 2018, described, “... [the team is] visiting as ‘critical friends’ at a pivotal time in our work with homework. We are at the initial stages of developing a plan to potentially transition our District from a more traditional view and practice of homework to something more innovative and meaningful to student achievement.”

One of the highlights of our visit was the generous schedule of focus groups that were open to members of the consultancy team and provided a sense of current homework practices and beliefs about future homework ideology. Over the course of three days in the Eastchester Schools, the visiting team examined the homework evidence provided by the district and conducted interviews with district office personnel, building level administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and Board of Education members.

In preparation for this visit, the district’s Tri-State Steering Committee decided on two Essential Questions to guide our thinking as we analyzed the evidence and focused our inquiry. The Essential Questions also provided a framework for the Descriptive Consultancy held on the third

day, a protocol that is organized as an extended conversation between the visiting team and district representatives. The two Essential Questions are:

- 1. To what extent do the current homework practices in the Eastchester School District reflect the District’s desired future homework ideology?**
- 2. To what extent does the District’s future homework ideology align with the most current research related to best practices in homework?**

## **Response to Essential Questions**

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### **Essential Question #1:**

**To what extent do the current homework practices in the Eastchester School District reflect the District’s desired future homework ideology?**

The Tri-State team commends Eastchester for its commitment to fostering high expectations and strong educational programs that lead all Eastchester students and graduates on the path to becoming contributing members of society as well as lifelong learners. One of the ways that the District is engaging its students in becoming lifelong learners is through its commitment to infuse purposeful, relevant, homework, with the intent of understanding its impact on student success. In order to study the role that homework plays in student learning, the District survey of all stakeholders, K-12, to determine current homework practices and core beliefs was the major resource for conversations with administrators and teachers.

At the elementary level, homework mainly focuses on math and ELA and is intended to reinforce skills based on daily lessons taught or as part of ongoing lessons for the week. Most of the homework seems to be program based. Elementary teachers work collaboratively with special education teachers to provide differentiated homework in math for their students, and ELA homework focuses on providing practice in spelling, vocabulary and reading, with some attention to grammar and mechanics. Homework, in some classes, is given to students on Monday to be returned on Friday, or is assigned nightly, except for Friday. The team found that the majority of teachers at the elementary level believe that homework teaches students responsibility, leads to the building of a strong work ethic and provides communication between the home and the school. However, the team suggests that the differentiation of assignments is somewhat inconsistent. According to elementary students we interviewed,

some students complete homework independently while others depend on parent or sibling support. Most elementary teachers consider homework as a process that informs their small group instruction, while other teachers simply check for completion. The team suggests that teachers consider assigned homework that is directly linked to curriculum and assessment rather than mostly the math or ELA programs. The team also wonders if there is a link between homework completion and student achievement level, a factor that might be examined as the District moves forward in this work.

At the secondary level homework is often based on the reinforcement and application of skills and to provide an opportunity to further a student's understanding of topics and content. At the middle school, parent perception was that homework is teacher-dependent, by team and/or course. Parents shared that homework at the middle school level often consists of worksheets and textbook review in preparation for upcoming tests. Parents also described the need for more balance in middle school assignments. Projects, reports, preparation for assessments can accrue for students, and there was considerable discussion about a building schedule that would sort, by degree of difficulty, homework (and test) expectations in the middle school.

At the high school, advanced placement and honors courses had the most time-consuming homework and we encountered similar observations about the need for testing and long-range assignments to be evened out over time. At the secondary level, some teachers expected homework completion, and attached student consistency to the quarter grade. Others did not include homework completion in the compilation of grades. Some high school teachers view homework as linked with an increase in student performance, and higher-level courses seemed to contain some differentiation and student choice. The majority of homework assignments for classes other than advanced courses were often end of unit questions in the textbook.

Cornell Notes, a system designed to synthesize and organize student thinking, is in place in the high school. The Cornell Notes template includes methods for note taking, reviewing and retaining material, and is subject dependent. The visiting team suggests the District review the recent research on the efficacy of this method and consider if it is warranted for all students. Students we interviewed described Cornell Notes as mandatory in some classes, optional in others, and time-consuming. We were left wondering if this approach has outlived its usefulness in the district.

The District is in the beginning phase of transitioning homework from the traditional approach to a more futuristic ideology based on best practice and innovation. In order for the District to make homework more meaningful for students, the visiting team suggests determining



relevance and rigor and its impact on homework practices through an internal Homework Audit. Continuing the practice of providing teachers autonomy in assigning homework, the system might create clarity by creating homework guidelines that are not overly prescriptive, but strongly suggest the attributes, purpose, and relevance listed in the Future Ideology framework.

The visiting team wondered if the District might consider including student voice in identifying opportunities for choice, creativity and collaboration when designing homework task. When we interviewed students, we found them to be highly intelligent and thoughtful. They had much to share with us, and we think the district might benefit from hearing their thinking, particularly in the same sort of focus-group settings we were privileged to share with them.

### **Essential Question #2:**

**To what extent does the District’s future homework ideology align with the most current research related to best practices in homework?**

This Essential Question was a challenging one for the team to consider given that the topic of homework automatically connects to one’s personal biases and experiences; comprehensive research on the relationship of homework to improved student achievement is still limited and somewhat contradictory. Additionally, as a team we discovered that within the research base there are examples that resulted from experimental, anecdotal, and correlational studies. As the Eastchester Schools continues its study of homework practices, the team suggests that the district take the time to collaborate with staff about current research. We were impressed with the homework samples that were collected as artifacts and represented one specific week in February in all schools across the district.

Harris Cooper, Duke University psychology professor, has reviewed extensive homework studies and delivered an Edcast at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, in 2016. In a 2006 meta-analysis, Dr. Cooper found a stronger correlation between homework and student achievement for students in the seventh through twelfth grade. At the elementary level there was almost no correlation, but Dr. Cooper’s conclusion was that homework for elementary students contributes to learning the habits of being a successful student. ([Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement? A Synthesis of Research, 1987–2003](#)). Although Dr. Cooper argues that a small amount of homework is useful for all students, he suggests specific time limits: for middle school students, the moderate correlation weakens after 60-90 minutes spent on homework, and at the high school level, it weakens after two hours spent on homework. When the homework assigned is designed to be purposeful, and engages students

with the use of technology, (videos, games, interactive challenges) the results are more impressive.

The visit team discovered that there are “research-based” guidelines to support teachers in thinking about their homework practices. Many of these guidelines are reflected in the District’s Future Homework Ideology. In its whitepaper, Stanford University’s *Challenge Success Program* ([Challengesuccess.org](http://Challengesuccess.org)) synthesizes these guidelines:

- Homework should be developmentally appropriate, differentiated, and able to be done independently. The visiting team in the consultancy suggested having students start on homework in class to help teachers assess appropriateness.
- Students need to explicitly understand the purpose of assigned homework and how it connects to the learning in class. Allowing for student choice and voice in their homework assignments encourages more engagement and ownership of the assignment.
- Homework needs to be completed within a reasonable amount of time.

As the team suggested during the Descriptive Consultancy, teachers might consider tracking actual homework task time. This can be achieved by having students do the assigned homework in class for a week or by asking students and parents to keep homework diaries of actual time spent on work at home. Additionally, the amount of time needed must directly correlate with the results.

Before closing, we’d like to offer the following suggestions and questions for the district to consider:

- Currently, the district uses programs as proxies for curriculum. Although the programs are sound and well-respected (for example, writers’ workshop, Go Math at the elementary level), we think it would make sense for the district to bring teachers together to develop an Eastchester curriculum in all content areas, but especially ELA and math, to incorporate the programs into the curriculum, and to have homework flow from the curriculum.
- There is a difference between data (which are numerical) and evidence (which is not). We think the district has much evidence relating to homework, and it would be helpful to have teachers identify what evidence would be helpful in examining homework, capture this evidence and discuss its likely impact on improving student learning. Doing

this can also assist the district in focusing its homework decisions on specific purposes relevant to class assignments.

- Some teachers, in all districts, not just Eastchester, confuse rigor with volume. Sometimes, less is more. We think it would be important for the building principals to discuss this distinction with their faculties. Here, again, the conversations can address meaningfulness and purpose.
- There is much research on student learning that discusses the importance of student voice, student choice and student ownership in student learning. These same attributes hold true for homework. Also supported by research is the power of differentiation – structuring assignments by individual learner rather than by whole class. We think these could be productive lines of inquiry for the district to pursue.
- In our discussions with parents and students, many expressed feeling “overloaded” with homework. While the actual amount of homework may or may not be oppressive, when it is coupled with the other in and out of school activities in which students are involved, such as sports, music, theater, tutoring, religious studies, etc, it contributes to the overall sense of stress that students feel.
- Students also expressed some dismay over homework assignments that are not collected and reviewed by their teachers (“Why are we doing this if the teacher doesn’t even look at it?”), or collected and reviewed but not returned to them in a timely manner. The district may want to engage the faculty in discussions around these concerns.
- We heard concerns from teachers and students about transitions: from grade 1 to 2, from grade 5 to 6, and from grade 8 to 9. At each of these transition points both teachers and students perceive that the demands of school, and of homework, are ratcheted up, and that many students are not properly prepared for these shifts. This is another area we think the district needs to examine, and we suggest bringing together teachers in the sending and receiving grades to examine homework expectations.
- The parents with whom we met are largely supportive of the district and perceive their children are being well-educated, but some are confused about the district’s approach to homework. They view homework as teacher-dependent rather than stemming from a district orientation. As children move up through the grades, several parents expressed concern about the amount of time it takes their children to complete homework

assignments. Some wondered if it might make sense for the district to establish time limits by grade level.

- Some parents (and teachers and students, as well) raised questions about a balanced life for students – at what point does homework interfere with students’ abilities to be engaged family members and participate in out-of-school activities? The question, “Who owns a student’s out-of-school time?” also arose in our conversations. In answering these questions, we think it might be productive to bring teachers together by grade level.
- Our team wondered whether it would be productive for the district to develop a Board of Education policy, and/or administrative regulations, relating to homework. Many districts have such policies and regulations, and they typically address matters such as meaningfulness/relevance of assignments, intra-district consistency, and time guidelines. We are not suggesting that Eastchester do this, but rather discuss whether this level of formality would be helpful to staff and parents.
- In meetings with district teachers, we sensed their concern about a mixed message being given to students. In some classes, teachers are structuring problem-based learning lessons for their students, yet giving students homework assignments that require rote learning and repetition. Our sense is that they are struggling with ways to align homework with how they teach. It might be useful to explore the possibility of bringing in a consultant with expertise in this area, someone who can help the teachers in developing high quality assignments that are consistent with their pedagogy.
- To reiterate a point made earlier in this report, there is inconsistency in Eastchester regarding the impact homework has on student grades. Some teachers respond to missed homework assignments by lowering students’ grades, while others don’t. We wonder if the district is comfortable with this sort of variance, and the potential (or real) impact it has on a student’s GPA and placement.
- A question that all districts grapple with is: “How will we know the impact of ...” In Eastchester’s case, the question relates to understanding the impact of the homework assignments given to students. Is homework having a beneficial impact on student learning, or is it mostly busy work that occupies students’ time but does little else? We think it would make sense for the district to engage students and teachers in thinking about this question. One possible data source is students who have graduated from the Eastchester schools and are in college or the work force.

In summary, we commend the district on selecting this challenging issue, looking closely at decisions, and hearing from students about their experiences with homework practices. The visiting team encourages the district to continue and extend its information gathering in order to present a document to the staff that reflects careful decision-making. It might be helpful to bring faculty focus groups together to analyze homework artifacts (student work) and explore explicitly embedding study skills within their homework practices. Protocols for these focus groups are available on the National School Reform Faculty website. The team also suggests that the District's goal of developing and implementing a common literacy curriculum will help unify its homework practices. The district's planned infrastructure work will support the integration of technology to enhance not only homework practices but also enhance communication with students and parents regarding student progress and achievement.

Finally, we thank the Eastchester School District for the warm welcome, terrific hospitality, and the open, candid conversations. The staff is highly professional and dedicated to the growth of students from K-12, and the environment in each building is inviting. The staff's level of reflection and introspection is commendable and will serve the district well as it moves forward in developing and implementing its future homework ideology.