



**Tri-State  
Consortium**

**Scarsdale Public Schools**

**TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY**

**Wellness: An Approach to Student Stress**

**April 19-20, 2017**

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## Tri-State Consortium

### Scarsdale Public Schools

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### Wellness: An Approach to Student Stress

April 19-20, 2017

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**TRI-STATE LIAISONS:**

***“Student well-being is strongly linked to learning. A student’s level of well-being at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement in learning, and their social-emotional behavior. It is enhanced when schools in partnerships adopt evidence-informed practices with families and the community. Optimal student well-being is a sustainable state, characterized by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships in school, resilience, self-optimization and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences.”***

*(Noble, Wyatt, T. 2008).*

The Scarsdale Union Free School District invited a visiting team of representative members of the Tri-State Consortium to visit the district on April 19-20, 2017. Applying the Consortium consultancy format to frame our inquiry, the team was made up entirely of some of the most respected professionals in the region. All levels of district and building level administrators were included on the team, as were several classroom teachers. It should be noted that the enthusiasm with which these team members responded to the invitation is indicative of the respect and admiration that is accorded to the Scarsdale schools by their colleagues in the region.

The purpose of our visit was to learn about and provide feedback and recommendations on the district’s recent initiative aimed at examining and improving the districtwide approach to promoting student wellness. Scarsdale is a longstanding and valued member of the Consortium, and our 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 districts’ progress in advancing teaching and learning.”** As we move through our third 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.

Prior to our arrival in the district, we received a welcome message from Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Lynne Shain, containing the comprehensive self-study conducted by Scarsdale, titled “High Academic Expectations and Student Wellness.” The study provided an overview, in effect, an inventory, of programs at every grade level that address student wellness in any way. The self-study report was exceptional in that it included active links to program descriptions, outside resources and other evidence relevant to our visit in a convenient electronic format useful to the visiting team and the district alike.

Further, the overview included in the self-study document reflected the district’s working concept of wellness, which district leaders defined as including three realms or manifestations: body, mind, and spirit. The documents described the numerous definitions that were considered, studied, and continued to be part of the conversation. The “inventory” demonstrated that the district is involved in districtwide goals, with building specific initiatives at each level. It was reassuring to the visiting team to discover that some of the initiatives had been in place for many years and evidenced an attention to students’ wellness and healthy development that clearly predated current concerns.

Superintendent Thomas Hagerman welcomed the Tri-State team in the Board of Education Room where the team was based for two days. Referring to Scarsdale’s long-term connection with the Consortium, Dr. Hagerman presented a brief history of our visits and consultancies, the resulting development of authentic Capstone assessments, and the Consortium’s partnership with the district at the Global Learning Alliance in Singapore. (2012) Dr. Hagerman assured the team of the district’s commitment to the balance of high academic expectations and wellness.

Assistant Superintendent Lynne Shain spoke to the ground work already in place throughout the district, and described the current iteration of the wellness focus using the metaphor of a “protoplanet, a large body of matter in orbit around the sun or a star and thought to be developing into a planet.” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/protoplanet>)

Aligning the work in place with the work in progress, Ms. Shain referred to the protoplanet theory as a way for us to frame our thinking about Scarsdale’s journey to a common understanding of wellness of body, mind, and spirit. She also referred to Scarsdale Education Foundation grants awarded to teachers to rethink health, wellness, K-12; research centered on current observations of student wellness and health and presentations to K-12 faculty; Dr. Marc Brackett, (2015) ,Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence; Dr. Stuart Slavin, (2015), St. Louis University Hospital, who spoke to the faculty about student stressors; and Dr. Robert Brooks (2017) who spoke about resilience and the role of school climate in students’ lives.

Ken Bonamo, High School Principal, outlined the major phases of concentration on the transition from the middle to the high school; the creation of Freshman Teacher Teams assigned to rising 9th graders; the connection with Stanford University’s Denise Pope, who introduced Challenge Success, a survey that studies the alignment of parenting and school expectations and the concomitant issues of teacher expectations, homework assignment practices, and the need to re-imagine high school course content. Posing the question of the connection between well-being and a love of learning, Mr. Bonamo described the staff’s attention to the master schedule and their keen awareness that stressors can be reduced. The high school staff responded immediately to homework concerns, creating a pilot initiative that commits staff to calibrate homework assignments and to avoid assignments over district breaks. Mr. Bonamo emphasized the existing and ongoing attention of the high school faculty, the seriousness of the response to the Challenge Success survey, and the sense of “positive intentionality” in the high school environment.

Dr. Elliott Cohen, a district psychologist, described “positive psychology” as the districtwide approach to wellness of body, mind, and spirit. Dr. Cohen referred to the graphic descriptor with “Positive Education” as a metaphoric umbrella, overseeing models of existing concentrated efforts toward systemic well-being: Growth Mindset, Character Education, Multimodal social-emotional learning, and Mindfulness. Dr. Cohen also discussed the

acronym, P.E.R.M.A., a construct that outlines the components of a positive psychological approach: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Purpose, and Accomplishment. Elementary principal, Scott Houseknecht, spoke to a similar paradigm of commitment to age-appropriate, scaffolded efforts for elementary students in the five schools: Yoga, Filling Buckets, Mindfulness, “Coping Boxes,” and Meditation, to name a few examples

Director of the Scarsdale Teachers’ Institute, Ann Marie Nee, presented an overview of the wide range of courses offered to all teachers in-district and in partnership with the Edgemont Public Schools: digital teacher portfolios, Lesson Study, student wellness, multiculturalism through the arts, global learning, for example, and Summer courses covering instructional strategies, such as Psychological Interventions for Educators, Reflective Practices, and Differentiated Instruction.

Ray Pappalardi, K-12 Director of Physical Education, Health and Athletics, closed the overview with specific reference to the department’s continuous attention to student stressors and challenges, and their direct link to fitness, nutrition, and exercise.

In a separate interview in the Scarsdale Teachers Institute, Ms. Kathleen McGreal, Coordinator of the Mentor Program, outlined a compelling description of the ongoing attention and collegial support in place for teachers who are new to the district. The team was impressed to learn about the STI “Foundations” course, designed by teachers for teachers and organized by elementary, middle, and high school levels. This district commitment illustrates the decision to develop the next generation of teachers, to guide and support the beginning of their Scarsdale careers through orientation to the culture, and to provide timely, relevant information.

The Consultancy format aligns with the district’s specific focus for the team that was developed, collaboratively, by the district’s Tri-State Steering Committee. Committee members described several meetings throughout the previous and current school year to decide the focus and create an Essential Question that is designed to provide a direction for

the visit team's inquiry and thinking processes as we moved through the schools, interviewing building-based administrators and teacher leaders, counselors, psychologists and central office administrators. This question also framed the Consultancy protocol, an extended conversation between representative team members and selected administrators that occurred at the close of the second day.

### **Essential Question:**

**We are strongly committed to Wellness. To what extent is our commitment to support and sustain a strong culture of student wellness reflected in our:**

- Transfer and application of research-based partnerships
- District-Wide/ K-12 Approach
  - ❖ Scarsdale Teachers Institute: Courses that promote evidenced-based models linked to positive psychology and positive education
  - ❖ Mission Statement, Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow 2.0
  - ❖ Whole Child philosophy
  - ❖ Active Learning
    - Elementary: *Inner Resilience Program*, Linda Lantieri, founder.
    - Middle School: Positive Psychology: Positive Psychology Center (Penn)
    - High School: Challenge Success, Stanford University
      - Strategies to help students manage academic expectations
      - Efforts to Inform parents, community, and the Board of Education

Evaluating the district's success in addressing the Essential Question requires an acknowledgement that this current initiative has been in place less than two years. At no time did the district imply that the challenge of wellness has been mastered. Throughout the pre-visit preparation and the visit itself, it was clear, and commendable, that the district is seeking feedback early in the process in order to improve its response to the essential question and related issues. The visiting team's assessment and recommendations are made with that fact in mind.

In general, the visiting team felt that the district is responding well to its Essential Question. Evidence of a strong commitment to wellness was described in every interview, document, and presentation we experienced. The commitment was evident in the good thinking and current planning that spanned the three realms of body, mind, and spirit. The commitment did span all grade levels and buildings, and it was evident to varying degrees in each of the subsets related to the Essential Question: the Scarsdale Teachers Institute; the mission statement; the models chosen for elementary, middle and high school; the effort to create coping strategies for students; and the intent to involve all constituencies. Although the commitment to designing an aligned K-12 approach is being considered, the current policies and processes are centered on developmentally appropriate practices specific to student concerns.

### **Recommendations:**

Before launching into the recommendations that the visiting team believes are worthy of consideration, there are three points we would like to express to provide context, urgency, and reflection for the recommendations.

The first point, which we think provides important context for the recommendations, is that the visiting team found everyone in the Scarsdale community, students, teachers, administrators, parents, and Board of Education members, to be clear in their desire to attend to the issue of wellness. Evidence was abundant in the considerable work that has already been accomplished. In fact, so much work is in place that it is fair to say that every student has been touched by efforts to promote wellness and address the negative impacts of the stress in the school environment. There is ample evidence that many of these efforts have focused on prevention with younger children, as well as documentary and anecdotal evidence of efforts focused on coping and/or remediation of unwellness with older students.

The second point relates to urgency, as the problem of “unwellness” is real. Virtually everyone interviewed indicated that as students progress through the system, the school

experience becomes viewed as an increasingly high stakes venture that prioritizes the value given to achievement and rigor to an extent that minimizes other values, such as fellowship and community, experimentation and risk taking, the pleasure of learning, and investing time in fun, for example. This finding was certainly familiar to our team members, and many would describe the same concern in their districts. We learned that there are high school students who do not perceive an experience of community, and our conversations both within the team and with the high school teachers were similar. The topics of identity, belonging, and connection to an adult are on top of the list of concerns at Scarsdale High School. In our conversations with high school teachers, we discussed the connection between the team's observations and their own sense of urgency to support all students.

The third point, which we hope provides an opportunity for reflection in the school community, because it certainly did for us, was the strong value of autonomy among the faculty. During the opening session, the district administration and the visiting team leaders urged the team to accept autonomy as a unique part of the district's culture and to respect it as such. When Scarsdale teachers spoke to us about autonomy, they tended to express the value in terms of teacher satisfaction and fulfillment. We heard teachers celebrate that they were not bound to present certain lessons or topics on a schedule, that their professional determination of when content is delivered provided opportunity to build lessons around student-driven interests and needs.

The Tri-State team discussed the connection between teacher autonomy and a perceived lack of coordination of major student assignments. We recommend a schedule of tests, other assessments, and research papers by department that can be a step toward easing the anxieties that many students described. We learned that when students are included in decisions around assessment schedules, they feel respected and counted on to produce their best work.

1. We suggest the district consider that after this first year of learning about the issues and trying various interventions/programs/approaches, it may appropriate to take stock and narrow the scope of the initiative. Less may be more. We also perceive that

there is some redundancy at this point, and a close look at repetitious practices embedded in different programs and approaches might be helpful. At the conceptual level, constructing a framework based upon the mind, body, spirit, and how these elements integrate in the academic environment, would be of value. In addition, establishing a practical focus at each school level might be achieved by narrowing to one appropriate aspect of wellness, one type of intervention, or one symptom to address. This method would leave plenty of room for autonomy, and improve the likelihood that the schools can experience success.

A corollary to this recommendation is a suggestion to engage faculty and administration in a discussion about the extent to which intra-district consistency is important in Scarsdale. We are not taking a position on this matter, but think it is a worthy matter to unpack district-wide. We differentiate consistency from standardization, the former implying a common “what,” and the latter implying both a common “what” and “how.”

2. We recommend the district consider whether to work toward establishing a long-term plan, a series of phases or steps that will eventually address all desired aspects of wellness over time. It may not be possible to ever complete the established phases, but the task will provide helpful direction and reflection. Engaging student voice can be productive here - student stressors in our schools are affecting the daily performance of students; candid conversations with student focus groups would enlarge the scope of interventions.
3. We recommend the district establish a clear description of what success with each step or phase will look like to provide direction, to facilitate evaluation, and to better understand the impact of this initiative. We suggest using the definitions of success to develop reasonable benchmarks for evaluation of efforts.
4. We recommend spending some time on how to coordinate among the different models used at each school. Inner Resilience, Positive Psychology and Challenge

Success are excellent frameworks for the work at each level, but their effectiveness for students over the long run will be improved if alignment and transition issues are anticipated.

5. We recommend giving more attention and priority to student surveys. SHS students seemed to speak with a clear voice through the surveys. Student focus groups may be a good way to follow up, to identify specific experiences, and to return to students with subsequent thoughts about ways to deal with stress and wellness. We also had discussions about the extent to which technology is causing students more stress or helping them to manage it, and suggest speaking with student about this question.
6. We recommend efforts to improve internal communications between individual teachers, within grade levels, within buildings, and between buildings. Much good work is going on that is not being shared, or is not being emulated by others. Sharing can lead to: replication of best practices; building upon the work of others and upon the skills to which students have already been introduced; a sense of coherence for students; and opportunities for celebration of success!
7. We recommend considering the use of focus groups, faculty meetings and other venues to discuss topics with a goal of achieving clarity on relevant factors. Appropriate constituencies should be included based on the topic. Topics might include:
  - a. Competition and school culture - stress is a two-sided coin and there is a difference between healthy stress and unhealthy stress: has the district looked at this, and to what degree is there an appetite for reducing unhealthy stress?;
  - b. Understanding and clarifying the teacher's responsibility in addressing wellness needs;
  - c. How do students who do **not** reflect the dominant values of the culture manage? Genuine and widespread recognition for "life stars," as well as academic stars is important for both individuals and the larger student body;

- d. Coping with culture vs. changing culture is an important question for the district to examine: what needs to be changed to allow for both optimal achievement of wellness? It is important to note that there are many students in Scarsdale (as in other districts) who excel in the current environment, and who may be stressed by an attempt to reduce stress;
  - e. Consider whether wellness is an “approach” or a “program.” An approach implies a high priority and the integration of wellness efforts into the academic and social culture. A program implies a secondary priority, an add-on, and is an option to consider when circumstances allow. The “approach or program” continuum ultimately determines the role of wellness in decision making;
  - f. Review the current impact of gatekeeping for honors and Advanced Topics courses, sometimes viewed as obstacles for students to change and grow as they move through the system. The goal of preventing students from encountering too much stress by being placed in higher level courses may be noble, but finding selection methods that eliminate the feeling of arbitrariness upon those judged will reduce stress, as will permitting students to challenge themselves when they perceive they are ready to do so.
8. We heard a strong focus on time as a primary factor in creating and resolving stress. We suggest thinking about time problems as a symptom. (e.g. “I am stressed because I don’t have time to do all my assignments and study for my tests tomorrow.”). It may be helpful to think of time as a constant that we manipulate to cope with stress; for example: we use more time to complete more tasks, or work faster to do more in the time available. Consider that other, perhaps healthier ways to resolve stress are to regulate the workload, reduce competitiveness, and impact the culture. In thinking about culture, keep in mind that fun and downtime are not the opposite of competitiveness. Factors that combat competitiveness are support, cohesion, collaboration, and kindness.
9. We think it could be helpful for district administration to narrate the “why” of this initiative for the staff and community. Because Scarsdale students score at high

levels on all measures of academic attainment and apply to are granted admission to the finest colleges and universities, some in the school community are not clear about the need for a focus on wellness. Perhaps sharing the Challenge Success data could be a way to help all members of the school community more clearly understands the need for this focus.

10. We wonder if it would be helpful for the district to gather/generate data around wellness, which is a challenging concept to quantify. Our thinking is that there is a difference between data, which is numerical, and evidence, which is something else. Data on wellness may be difficult to generate, but we are confident that the district generates much relevant evidence every day about stress and wellness. The challenges will be to identify what constitutes evidence and to capture it.

### **Conclusion:**

It was noted at the beginning of this report that the professionals invited to participate on this visiting team were particularly enthusiastic about the opportunity to work in the Scarsdale School District. None of us was disappointed. We observed a commitment to excellence that is second to none and a level of caring that was inspiring. We were particularly impressed with the faculty and administration's determination to balance academic excellence and wellness within their community, as well as their recognition of the district's growth needs. This is evident in the fact that the visiting team did not observe any weaknesses or needs that were not already identified for us by district personnel. The district's approach to studying research-based models, using highly respected consultants, and creating rich professional development are also admirable and have already led to progress.

Special thanks to Lynne Shain, to Scarsdale's Tri-State Steering Committee, and to all the educators we met across the district for their warm welcome, time, and expertise. All thanks to our drivers to and from the elementary schools and the middle school, to the Steering Committee for such careful attention to our creature comforts, and to all those we interviewed for their candor and trust in our position as colleagues and critical friends.

