



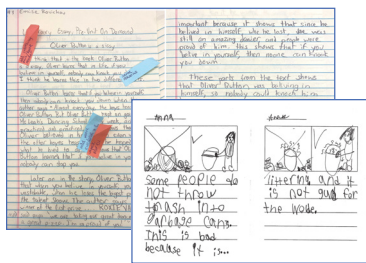
Case Study of Darien Public Schools

All five elementary schools in Darien partner with TCRWP. Hindley and Tokeneke, two elementary schools, have been awarded National Blue Ribbon status, and Julie Droller, Director of Elementary Education, is clear they all deserve it.

Julie notes that across all five elementary schools, there is “tremendous excitement over reading.” She thinks that excitement is fueled by a belief in choice. She says, “We believe in choice: choice in the books students are reading, the goals they set for how to improve as readers, the topics they read and research, and what line(s) of inquiry they will follow in their book clubs. Teachers have choice in the books they read aloud and use as mentor texts.



Excitement over reading is also fueled over frequent visits by parents to read aloud to children, and schoolwide activities such as World Read-Aloud Day celebrations, Book of the Month (where all students in K-5 and their families share a selection of carefully selected shared read-aloud texts,) and “March Madness” where students vote on their favorite picture books, read aloud by the authors themselves, and eagerly await the final bracket to find out the schoolwide favorite!



Choice is one part of Darien’s distinctive brand. This is a district that also values giving people voice—and not surprisingly, with choice and voice comes skyrocketing levels of engagement. Teachers in Darien have choice in the PD they engage in. Across the district, teachers were invited to choose a year-long topic of study to focus on with their staff developer, knowing that every topic would involve research and reflective practice and would influence cross-grade teaching and learning. In one grade level, for example, one group focused on interactive read-aloud with accountable talk, one on nonfiction reading and writing, and one on small group instruction—and all of these inquiry groups have thought about implications for their work not only across grades but also across disciplines.

The young people are on fire with a feeling that their work adds up, that it matters. Teachers in the district explain, “When we co-constructed a new unit with our staff developer, we learned new ways of thinking and talking about social justice. We facilitated powerful whole-class conversations and modeled new ways of taking notes that translated into “minds on fire” independent reading and more thoughtful and deeper book club work. Nothing felt compliant anymore. Watching the kids truly engage with the content was inspiring. Students shared that they would never read the same way again; they learned to pause and think about characters, relationships, and internal and external pressures from multiple perspectives. They were eager to give “tours” of their Readers Notebook to show examples of the reading work they were doing on their own.

In a district that prioritizes choice and voice, it is no surprise that the writing workshop flourishes. Droller says, “Our kids are writers because they write a lot, developing their fluency across narrative, opinion and informational writing genres. They study mentor texts to analyze author’s craft, and work with end goals in sight. Some of those goals revolve around publications. Our kindergarteners sang and performed their opinion writing like actors on Broadway.” In a district that values choice and voice, it is no surprise that self-assessment is highlighted. Across the district, kids use the checklists and exemplars to reflect on their writing and to create concrete, specific goals. They keep their checklists close at hand as they write, and deliberately work to incorporate standards-based elements into their writing, doing so with automaticity. “Our kids work on grammar and conventions just as they work on structure, elaboration, and development,” Droller says.

Darien’s choice and voice for students and educators help build lifelong learners.”

This district’s average testing ranking is in the top five 5% of public schools in Connecticut. The principals in Darien believe that high expectations, agency, and engagement will continue to grow amazing results in Darien. They scored over 83% on or above grade level on the 2021 SBAC, despite a year and a half of remote and hybrid learning. Their K-2 students have an average of over 80% reading at or above grade level.