



Case Study of PS/MS 20 P.O. George J. Werdann, III: A Break-the Odds Success Story

In the handful of years in which TCRWP has partnered with PS/MS 20, the school has made big progress—progress that is evident not only in scores but also in changes in the schoolwide norms and culture. When TCRWP first partnered with PS/MS 20, the goal was to support a schoolwide love of reading. A big emphasis was placed on developing classroom libraries full of high-interest books. Teachers College Reading and Writing project played a big part in helping teachers to recommit themselves to their classroom libraries. The Project gave each 3-5 classroom throughout the school a carefully curated classroom library worth thousands of dollars and helped teachers organize those books in ways that helped kids select books that were challenging and interesting for them.

This is receiving attention as a break-the-odds success story. At PS 20, 97% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and more than 230 of them have IEPs. Sixteen percent of the students live in homeless shelters. The population at this school includes 10% Black or African American students and 75% Hispanic/Latino students. The school wasted no time before it began showing real growth. Within one year, scores in third and fourth grade rose by almost ten percent. More importantly, students began buzzing with excitement over both their reading and their writing. PS 20 went from a School in Need to a School in Good Standing in one year.

“The beauty of literacy is back at PS 20.”

– Dr. Carla Ling

The students have not only grown academically, but they’ve also grown as a community of learners. The students here feel that PS 20 is a safe space to explore, learn, make mistakes and grow as individuals.



“Before the pandemic hit, our kids were already reading up a storm, they were already working well with partners, and what was, at that time, needed was more explicit assessment-based instruction,” Principal Ling says. “We’d already begun to focus on small group instruction—a focus that became even more important during the pandemic.” She adds, “Covid was hard but we tried to keep the love of reading going. Unfortunately, there was some loss, unfortunately. We never thought that we would come back from that loss as quickly as we did, the TCRWP has been a big part of us getting our feet back on the ground. We started by looking at what had worked before, and going back to some of that—so we reinvigorated our classroom libraries.”

At PS 20, staff developers and teachers study each child’s data, observe the child in action, and make instructional decisions for the child. As Principal Ling says, “We think together strategically about next steps. For example, the disruption of Covid has left some grade 3-5 kids with gaps in their knowledge of phonics. We’ve identified those kids and are thinking about how to provide them with the sequenced phonics support they need.

It is not just sequenced support that kids need. They also need to believe the work they are doing matters, and that it belongs to them. It is crucial that they engage with texts that bring important information and issues forward, and it is important that their reading and writing wrestle with huge real-world issues. For Principal Ling, it is not only important that kids learn to read and write, it also matters that they learn to see themselves as readers and writers. “They shouldn’t have to wait until college to be able to talk about an author’s perspective or intent or craft,” she says.

Another key to success at PS 20 is that literacy is supported across every discipline. Content area teachers—social studies and science teachers—use running records data to match students with texts that are accessible to them. ELA goals are important not only in language arts but also across the day. Principal Ling reports that teachers collaborate so they can seize every opportunity to support students’ goals—and to close the learning gap.

Ling gives generous credit to the team of staff developers from TCRWP who help her school. She states, “They’ve taken teachers under their wings and shown them what they can do next. Staff developers have helped teachers collaborate with each other more, sharing the load of planning together, providing them with routines and shared responsibilities. They do the overall planning together, modifying curriculum in response to students’ interests and needs.”

Reflecting on the past few years, Principal Ling says, “The beauty of literacy is back at PS 20. We hope it never leaves our hallways again.”

Results

TCRWP was with PS 20 for only six months when we began to see measurable progress. Fourth grade showed a 10% climb in that time, and within the year the third grade scores also improved by 10%. Using different, but important, measures, students in grades 3-5 increased the number of books they were reading sixfold, going from 40 books per month (total) in September to 240 by February.

