



Case Study of PS 15, Manhattan, Where the Belief that People Can Move Mountains Undergirds Success

TCRWP began its partnership with PS 15 in 2014, when the school was a low performing school. Since then, students' performance levels have improved dramatically. The school was recently recognized as a School of Recognition in Good Standing, with special commendation as 'Most Improved.'

PS 15 is a diverse school in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Eighty-three percent of the students at this school are entitled to free and reduced lunch. The population includes 51.5% Hispanic students, 12.9% African American students, and 26.8% Asian students.

"It's all about being willing to be vulnerable with each other and to collaborate."

– Irene Sanchez

This school, like every school, has faced big Covid-related challenges. Principal Irene Sanchez is especially concerned that the school's hallmark commitment to reading took a hit during the pandemic. "Excitement [for reading] decreased during Covid," she reflected. "But," she quickly added, "already that is changing. We're pushing independent reading. All of us are looking for ways to increase the volume of reading students do. As part of this, teachers are setting individual goals with students." At PS 15, the belief is that reading is a pathway towards a college education. Reading also gives kids mirrors and windows, helping them reflect on their lives and on the lives of others.

At PS 15, the focus is not just on performance in reading, but on the process and the reasons for reading. Everyone at the school recognizes that reading takes place in many different ways across the entire school day. This is a place where literacy is integrated into every part of the curriculum.

Kids are equally committed to writing. Sanchez notes, "We try to make writing personal—and of course, doing so comes naturally in the TC units." The motto at PS 15 is to "meet kids where they are and to get them where they need to be." Because connecting with kids is all important for that growth to happen, the teachers, school leaders, and TCRWP staff developers have found that student engagement is key. This is a school where kids grow to feel successful, so not surprisingly, celebrations are extra important here. The school celebrates students in ways both big and small. With help from TCRWP staff developers, the school has learned that although, yes, some celebrations revolve around grand events like publishing parties for student writing, there are other times when the celebrations come in the form of small personal comments, shared in the intimacy of a reading or a writing conference... and those can be equally potent. "In every way, celebration is embedded in what teachers do everyday," says Sanchez. It is also embedded in what Sanchez does!

The community at PS 15 rallies around Sanchez's vision for the school. For her, it is all-important that PS 15 is a dynamic, academically rigorous neighborhood school, and a community that gives all students a creative, intellectually challenging, diverse and nurturing school culture. That culture is not just for kids, either. Students and faculty inquire, explore and discover together, delighting in learning, and benefiting from an atmosphere of respect and mutual trust. Principal Sanchez especially commends TCRWP staff developers for helping her teachers understand their own strengths. How important it is that teachers know their teaching can move mountains! Sanchez especially notes that work with data-based instruction and interventions—work that meets the needs of each student on an individual level—has yielded progress.

Sanchez emphasizes, "Our mission is to advance our students on their journey towards college and career readiness by fueling their drive to explore and learn about our world and connect to others." Principal Sanchez gives "thanks to TCRWP, acknowledging that the school partnership with the Project has helped PS 15 grow into its mission and move students towards college."

At PS 15 there is also a focus on responsive teaching, and that includes differentiation. In both ICT and G&T classrooms, learners are encouraged to say, "I don't know." Too often in schools, there is a pressure to be the smartest. At PS 15, the message is that mistakes are good. Sanchez says, "You have to live in the process of getting it wrong. Let's live in the mistake." TCRWP staff developers, as well as all the school's leaders, demonstrate this willingness to take risks, to own mistakes, to reflect on ways to improve.

Principal Sanchez points to a variety of factors that have led to student success at her school, starting with the ways teachers have learned to collaborate with each other through staff development. She notes, "It's all about being collaborative and to be willing to be vulnerable with each other. We have a culture where staff sees that we are learning together. If you have learned something, share something. We are constantly celebrating the sharing that is happening."

Results

In 2014, when TCRWP began working with PS 15, 3% of students were achieving 3s and 4s on state ELA tests. At the time of writing, 60% of students were achieving 3s and 4s. Principal Sanchez believes that the work in reading also accelerated math scores for students, bringing the numbers of students who scored 3s and 4s on state Math testing from 10% in 2014 to 66% in 2019.