



Case Study of PS 249, Brooklyn, The Caton School: A School that Shows the World What’s Possible

In 2021, PS 249 received recognition as a National Blue Ribbon School. It is also heralded as the number one Title One school in the country, and Principal Elisa Brown was one of only eight leaders across the country, and the only in New York, to be awarded the Terrel H. Bell Award for Outstanding Leadership by the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program.

More than 75% of the students at PS 249 receive free and reduced lunch. The population is 43% Black/African American and 46% Hispanic/Latino.

Many attribute the school’s extraordinary achievements to the passion and power of its leader, but Ms Brown believes that it’s her teachers’ belief in the students and in the critical importance of their work that makes the difference. She explains, “At this school, we all believe that college begins in pre-kindergarten. We know that every student in our school, without exception, without excuses, will be proficient or advanced in reading, writing, and mathematics. We are totally and absolutely committed to the academic success of every student in our school. Every student deserves the opportunity to be educated in a way that prepares them for college if they so choose to attend. We will cultivate our students’ personal character, foster creativity and collaborative skills. All students can learn, and it is the school’s job to make this happen. Partnering with TCRWP has helped our vision become a reality.”



Any visitor to PS 249 quickly recognizes that Ms Brown leads with her vision in mind, enabling the school to provide a coherent, rigorous academic curriculum that focuses on academic achievement, personal character, opportunities to innovate, and college readiness. It is a culture that encourages anti-racism and that works to be sure that every child and every grown up knows that they belong.

Reflecting on her school’s history, Brown says, “The journey to today was easy, and we couldn’t have done this without our partnership with TCRWP. When Brown first initiated the work, some of her staff balked at the approach to literacy represented in the TCRWP curriculum and at the mindset shifts that were required of them. Brown, however, persevered. She became the schools #1 learner, attending professional development sessions herself right alongside her staff. She joined her staff in studying the workshop pedagogy and curriculum.

“We let kids take over — let them talk, we let them write, we let them read. It is so powerful.”
— Elisa Brown

Ms Brown and her teachers also studied children’s and young adult literature, slowly building rich text sets of fiction and nonfiction. “You just can’t skimp on the libraries and be short on books. I go all-out on making sure kids’ baggies of books are brimful. The kids need to be carrying books between home and school,” she said. Brown makes sure books are going home with kids year round. In the summers, she organizes read-alouds in the park. Kids know that their principal is head over heels in love with books. “I have students hunting me down in the hallways asking me for the most popular series. They hand me lists of favorite books and write me letters pleading for me to supply them with books by favorite authors.” Brown’s emphasis on books has built a strong reading culture throughout the school, which has proven beneficial.

But she is equally clear that professional development matters. Whatever funds aren’t spent on books go towards helping her teachers have time and opportunities to study at Teachers College.

Professional development has shifted in profound ways inside the school, because the school provides, as well as participates in, professional development. Teachers set up a variety of lab sites, wherein clusters of teachers go into classrooms to study what kids are doing, to imagine and practice small groups, to try out a new strategy. This is how PD happens when TCRWP staff are on site, but it is also how PD happens when staff developers are not on site. Teachers from other schools often visit PS 249, and visitors are welcomed into the learning community. “When my teachers get to teach other teachers, they own their own learning, they polish their own learning. Teaching others is the highest form of learning,” said Brown.



Results

In 2014, 43% of students received 3s or 4s on the state ELA tests. At the time of writing, 60% of students were receiving 3s or 4s.