



Case Study of PS 290 Manhattan New School: A School that Embraces Social Change

Three words signify the values of the Manhattan New School: Belonging, Significance, and Fun. An emphasis on joy brings the school community together. Teachers play an important role in keeping this spirit alive in their classrooms. Principal Esposito says, “The adults need to be passionate and to love kids and to love learning.” It’s this love that the school has used to put students first, and that helps to explain the school’s recent recognition as a National Blue Ribbon School.

Esposito explains, “Kids need to have a voice. Their sense of engagement and agency supports our mission.” The buzz that results when students lead discussions with family and friends on community issues is emblematic of the spirit at Manhattan New School. Students at this school—also known as PS 290—are taught to be reflective both about what they do and about the world around them. They know that at their school, they have a place in which they can love, be loved, and enjoy learning.



“Reflection is key to all the work we do.”

– Doreen Esposito & Jamie Kushner

The school has worked with their TCRWP staff developers to fulfill this vision. Teachers approach reading and writing as tools that help children find their voices and their places in the world. Students have learned not only to speak up for themselves, but also to attend to the voices of others in their community. Esposito recalls that recently, when visiting a classroom, the students stopped each other during a discussion. “One said, ‘Hey, Justin hasn’t had a chance to speak yet.’” That kind of attentiveness to the class community explains why, at PS 290, students lead their own reading and writing conferences, providing feedback to each other. It also explains the book club and inquiry group discussions they have, and the whole class discussions as well, in which one child adds onto or questions the ideas of another.

This culture helps explain the test scores at PS 290; since becoming a TCRWP school, those scores have risen steadily. Scores have risen more than 15 % since the school started with TCRWP. Fifth graders at this school earn scores that are among the highest in the City—an important indicator of the school’s long-term results. Over 80% of the students at PS 290 read at or above grade average—in the third and fourth grade, that figure is even higher, with over 90% of children reading at or above the average for those grade levels. In other words, over 88% of students at grades three through five received a three or a four on the state exams.

The school is committed to Social Justice standards. Esposito says, “The 5th graders have all read and embraced Stamped for Kids,” referencing a book adapted for kids by TCRWP’s Director of Diversity and Equity, Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul. The teachers have worked to provide more opportunities for students to see their experiences and the experiences of others reflected in the books they read. Visitors to PS 290 can watch kids talk, as they go about selecting their books, about how one book provides mirrors, another, windows—and most, provide both.

Manhattan New School embraces their staff developers. “We consider them members of our community,” says Assistant Principal Jamie Kushner. She notes how much she appreciates it when staff developers remember students’ names on subsequent visits. In a recent conversation, Kushner repeatedly emphasized that TCRWP has played a big part in the school’s approach to literacy and yes, to their scores on state assessments.

A culture of joy and making meaningful connections with students has supported an asset-based approach to feedback and continuous improvement. Esposito says, “Reflection is key to all of the work we do. We are always reflecting on how we can be better from a strength-based approach and not a deficit-based approach.”



Results

- Third Grade: 89% read at or above grade level
- Fourth Grade: 95% read at or above grade level
- Fifth Grade: 78% read at or above grade level

From 2014, when TCRWP began working with PS 290, to 2019, ELA proficiency scores jumped from 72% to 88%.