School performance on the New York English Language Arts (ELA) state test has been steadily improving at P.S. 249, The Caton School, in Brooklyn and people have taken notice. Over the past three years, the number of students scoring at the Proficient or Above range has jumped to 67% on the most recent administration - a 9% rise from 2016. Not only that, more students were performing at the advanced level. In 2015-16, 13% scored at Level 4 compared to 24% in 2017-18. Perhaps most impressive is the increase in the number of English Language Learners reaching grade-level proficiency - 55% in 2017-18 compared to 33% just two years prior. This improvement in student performance earned the school the National Title I Association Distinguished School in 2017, one of 100 schools in the country that was recognized nationally for exceptional student achievement.

Principal Elisa Brown said the school was not always that way. When she started as principal, Brown noticed that there was a balanced literacy approach that was inconsistent from classroom-to-classroom and grade-to-grade. She called it, “not fully TC.” She knew she wanted to bring in Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) and waited for an opportunity to open. She is now reaping the benefits of the partnership.

“I knew the TCRWP curriculum and work was good before I was the principal,” said Brown, who has been at P.S. 249 for 7 years. “You have to believe in the work. If you can't put your heart completely into it, don't bother.”

The journey to today was not an easy one, Brown said. When she initiated the work, some of her staff balked at the shift in mindset and approach to literacy represented in the TCRWP curriculum. Brown, however, persevered. She collaborated closely with TC staff developers and attended professional development sessions alongside her staff. They studied the workshop pedagogy and curriculum. They also studied children’s and young adult literature, slowly building rich text sets of fiction and nonfiction texts in school libraries.

“You just can't skimp on the libraries and be short on books. I go all out on the baggies too, for them to bring home their books,” said Brown, who makes sure books are going home year round. “I now have students hunting me down in the hallways asking me for the most popular series. They will hand me lists and write me letters.”

Brown’s early emphasis on books has built a strong reading culture throughout the school, which has proven beneficial. Whatever funding is left-over goes to pay for teachers to attend professional development at Teachers College.

Today, professional development has shifted in profound ways inside the school. Her teachers meet weekly and set up a variety of lab sites - sometimes with TC staff developers - to practice a mini-lesson, plan a Unit of Study, or evaluate readers’ and writers’ notebooks. They have also opened their doors to other schools to come in and work alongside them.

“When my teachers get to practice the work by teaching it to other teachers, it is the highest form of learning,” said Brown.

Brown believes TCRWP's approach to literacy is practical and allows students from all backgrounds to grow as readers, writers, and thinkers. “Giving time in school for students to read just makes sense. I didn’t do as much of that as I could. Now with this, we let kids take over - let them talk, let them write, let them read. It is so powerful.”
Principal Barbara Bellafatto remembered walking down the halls of her school and thinking something was not quite right at P.S. 36, The J.C. Drumgoole School in Staten Island. Students were all sitting in rows. On the desks were a selection of workbooks that students were flipping through. When she listened to the teachers, it was clear that there was no consistency in what students were being taught in the area of literacy. Fast forward, more than 10 years, a lot has changed, including performance on the New York English Language Arts (ELA) test. Where she had 45% of students reaching proficiency in 2013, her school now regularly outperforms the state and other schools on the annual assessment. In 2017-18, 62% of her students scored Proficient or above - 22% were in the advanced range.

“Test scores made an immediate jump after we started with TC, and the school has remained a strong performing school on the state assessment,” said Bellafatto. “You can see them apply the skills they have learned when they take the test. They write in the margins, and make their boxes and bullets.

“We continue to work at meeting the changing standards and the changes made in the assessment,” Bellafatto added.

Bellafatto credits the improvements with the long-standing partnership with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP), and the implementation of the Units of Study and workshop approach. Over time, a positive learning culture has been built. The steps to get there, however, were not always easy.

“We knew we had a lot to learn in terms of best practices as a staff. We also knew that we had to bring in outside professional development - TC - to do the work side-by-side with us,” said Bellafatto. “The TC work overall is brilliant.”

In getting her staff on board, Bellafatto committed to learning alongside them, and frequented the classrooms for positive support and feedback. There were visits to other schools and sessions with TC staff developers where her teachers learned how to get whole classes engaged in shared endeavors. They learned how to use assessments to drive small and individual conferences. Initially, Bellafatto noted, the changes in her school were somewhat superficial. Mini-lessons got shorter, for example.

“When we saw any approximation of practice we would be sure to note it positively,” said Bellafatto. “The most difficult struggle was to help the staff understand the methodology behind the work - the why of why we put leveled texts in the hands of students. The TC staff developers were amazing in this way.”

Bellafatto has also appreciated the support she has received as an administrator through special professional development for principals. It was here she learned best practices to support her staff and learn ways to further deepen the work with the TCRWP curriculum. Overall, Bellafatto has been pleased with the success of her school and what she sees students doing on a day-to-day basis.

“It should not continue to surprise me, but it does, to see how well our students write,” said Bellafatto. “It is powerful to see students with a book in their hands they can read, and watch them being stretched during guided reading. You can see the growth.”
Principal Louise Xerri loves to hear the sound of teachers instructing in the classroom with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) Units of Study curriculum. It is something that predates her tenure as principal of PS 199 Jessie Isidor Strauss in Manhattan, N.Y. and brings great joy to her work.

“The students get pulled in when the teachers say ‘Come on readers’, ‘Come on thinkers’, ‘Come on writers’,” said Xerri. “When 4- and 5- year olds hear this over and over, they believe it. It is teaching them that they can do this - it’s beautiful work.”

Through the TCRWP curriculum, Xerri added, “We truly get to show them how to be learners.” Although PS 199 has been a Project school for quite some time, improvement is ongoing. The percentage of students scoring at the proficiency or above range on the New York English Language Arts (ELA) assessment has been strong, moving from 80% in 2016-17 to 85% last year. Students performing at the advanced level has been growing consistently over the past three years, moving from 38% in 2015-16 to 54% in 2017-18. Also impressive is the growth in the number of students categorized as Economically Disadvantaged. This group has improved in meeting proficiency from 38% in 2015-16 to 54% in 2017-18.

Even though Xerri inherited TCRWP when she started twelve years ago, she said that constant tending is required to ensure the curriculum is being implemented well and that students are growing as readers and writers. Xerri noted one such challenge in recent years when many of her younger students were not transferring the writing skills being taught to other content areas. The issue was not only reflected in the writer’s notebooks and other assessments, it showed up in lower test scores. After a deep dive with her staff, and working closely with TCRWP staff developers, a plan came together - alongside new insights into the thinking of the students.

“We saw that they were over-analyzing what was being asked of them. The third graders would write about the symbolism that could be found in a rock, when all that was being asked of them was a question about the setting,” said Xerri. As a result of this work, improvement in writing has taken hold.

Xerri said the TCRWP curriculum has many benefits that support student independence - the ability for students to choose their own topics, work in a variety of genres, and apply grade-level appropriate comprehension strategies to their own reading. Xerri also appreciates that all students - regardless of background - have an opportunity to engage in the work.

“This is accessible to all, English Language Learners, students with disabilities. There is always some access point for students to engage,” said Xerri.