At North Shore Middle School (NSMS), not only have scores improved on the state ELA exam, but teachers have developed strong communities of practice across the content areas. The increase in student performance at North Shore has been significant enough to earn North Shore a special statewide recognition last May, when North Shore was honored during the Wisconsin Title 1 School of Recognition ceremony as one of 11 schools that had both High Achieving and High Performing performance on the Wisconsin state test.

North Shore students’ scores on state standardized tests have risen significantly since the school began to deeply implement TCRWP units of study. Test scores went from 61.9% proficient or higher in 2015-16 to 73.5% proficient or higher in 2017-18. In that same year, approximately one third of the school’s students performed in the advanced range. The school attributes its overall 11.6% rise in scores, and its increase in advanced proficiency to students reading more, students reading increasingly complex fiction and nonfiction texts and writing narratives, information pieces, and arguments as part of the TCRWP curriculum.

Principal Michele Schmidt says that North Shore did not always have the thriving academic community it has now. It used to be that there was little cohesion or opportunity for students to transfer skills from one part of the curriculum to another, or from one grade level to another at North Shore. The school also didn’t have as many students scoring advanced or proficient as they would have liked. Now all that has changed.

“Working with TCRWP has transformed our school,” Schmidt says. Before teachers began studying TCRWP reading and writing workshop methods and structures, and adapting TCRWP curricular tools, “everyone was kind of doing their own thing. There was no curricular foundation - things did not fit together.” Then teachers began attending TCRWP institutes and studying units of study. They began to work together to plan a rigorous and cohesive reading and writing workshop across grade levels.

Teachers at NSMS have become highly adept at TCRWP workshop pedagogy and curriculum. Teachers continue to attend summer institutes, and work with a TCRWP staff developer during the year. Now NSMS is bringing workshop across the curriculum, as so many TCRWP middle schools have across the country. “We have seen improvement in all content area writing,” said Schmidt. “Now we have started to have our Math teachers bring the workshop approach into their classrooms.”

NSMS’s story is one of a commitment to professional development and shared communities of practice. The school invested in teachers, sending them to first year and advanced TCRWP institutes. NSMS teachers helped TCRWP staff pilot and improve units of study. Teachers began their pedagogical work with a study of minilessons and targeted small group instruction. Teachers studied children’s and young adult literature and built rich libraries full of fiction and nonfiction texts to lure and challenge student readers. Teachers worked alongside their staff developer, and at institutes, on their own writing, so they could confidently model the high-level writing demanded by current standards.
TC Staff Developer Mandy Ehrlich has witnessed the change in student academics at North Shore during her tenure at the school.

“I have seen wonderful examples of students in book clubs, and in content area clubs. Kids reach for more challenging books. They have intellectual discussions. The classrooms feel like college seminars,” said Ehrlich. “The teachers are dedicated and they are doing the work.”

Schmidt asserts that the TCRWP units of study that North Shore teachers have been using align well with student expectations found in the Wisconsin state standards. The volume of writing required in the units, including those on argument and essay, help prepare all students - regardless of ability - exceptionally well, as does the emphasis on a tremendously high volume of complex reading, including challenging all-class texts, and increasingly difficult books read in book clubs. Meanwhile, the workshop structure allows teachers opportunities to confer individually with students and teach targeted small groups.

“We love that this curriculum helps not only the high-achieving students, but the kids who struggle. You can really differentiate. It really makes a difference,” said Schmidt.

“If you were to go to the staff today and say you were taking (TCRWP) away, you would have a mutiny on your hands,” Schmidt added.
School performance on the Wisconsin state assessment has been improving steadily over the past three years at Hartland South Intermediate School, since the school started working closely with TCRWP. In 2015-16, 60.9% of students scored Proficient or Advanced on the state standardized ELA test. In 2017-18, Hartland South had 69.8% of students performing at or above state standard, marking an 8.9% rise in proficiency, with 23% of students scoring in the Advanced level. Most impressive was the 19.5% rise in performance of the subgroup of students categorized as Economically Disadvantaged. These students moved from 40% of students meeting state standards in 2015-16 to 59.5% scoring proficient or above in 2017-18.

“I have three years of data in my hands that shows our students are growing and achieving,” said Risch.

Before Hartland South Intermediate School began working with TCRWP, three things were different. Teachers didn’t plan together as cohesively, students didn’t read or write as much, and students weren’t achieving as highly. Principal Risch says that he started his teachers with professional development with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, by sending his teachers to institutes, and purchasing units of study curricular supports. Then he brought in a TCRWP staff developer. Risch invested in professional development for teachers and literacy coaches, and his investment has paid off. His students have become powerful readers and writers, and his teachers have formed a strong teaching community.

With TCRWP support, Risch focused his PD on helping his teachers with deep implementation of units of study. “At first, you have to just jump in and use the TCRWP curriculum as it is prescribed,” said Risch, who believes TCRWP professional development, materials, and framework have been an important key to his school’s success. “It provides a consistent foundation for staff and students, and allows us to address the individual needs of students.”

Risch said that the TCRWP Units of Study align well with the expectations for students found in the Wisconsin state standards. His students are reading increasingly complex texts over each year and up the grade levels. They are writing arguments, information pieces, and narratives. They perform tremendously well on the state standardized exam.

Risch also notes the increased joy and engagement of students. He believes that since implementing the TCRWP reading work, students are choosing to read more on their own. He noted that his 4th graders read a lot over the recent holiday break. “We did not force them. They were actually enjoying it on their own.”
Principals Christine Cody can feel the energy as she moves among the language arts classrooms at Southwood Glen Elementary School. She also sees results on her state test scores. In 2017-18, the school had 72.5% of students at Proficient or Advanced; a 6% increase in scores from 2015-16. The sub-group of English Learners grew in proficiency from 45% Proficient or above in 2015-16 to 53.8% in 2017-18, an 8.8% gain for English Learners.

In Cody’s estimation, the learning culture has shifted dramatically at Southwood Glen Elementary School. Where she used to notice a lot of variety in terms of energy and engagement from classroom to classroom, now Cody can go into any classroom on a hall and find children deeply engaged in reading and writing. “This is a cognitively active and joyful place to learn,” she said.

Cody believes the implementation of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Units of Study and workshop approach has led to this positive change in the learning culture and improvement in school performance of her K-6 school.

Teachers know how to get a whole class engaged in shared endeavors, with minilessons and units of study. Teachers have learned to rapidly assess their students and respond to their needs with conferences and small groups. These teachers are workshop experts, and it shows in the well-run classrooms and engaged, independent students.

TCRWP Staff Developer Christine Ikin notes the level of collaboration and commitment among the district teams and literacy coaches. Ikin especially notes that teachers at Southwood Glen are willing to share their expertise with others. Southwood Glen teachers have opened their classrooms and shared their professional development. This year nearby Ben Franklin and Robinwood elementary schools are starting their journey with TCRWP. Principals and staff from Ben Franklin and Robinwood schools joined in the professional development sessions held at Southwood Glen.

Cody said that the collective work is rigorous and engaging for students, and aligns well with the expectations found in the Wisconsin state standards. She sees her teachers regularly assessing students - all her teachers understand their students’ current reading levels, their reading plans, and the book choices that will help them move up levels.

Cody also noted the ability to differentiate within the TCRWP framework, allowing teachers to support all students. This to Cody has been a critical component. “We want all kids to move forward,” she said. “TCRWP lets us move all our kids.”