

A Day in the District

Reading & Writing Literacy in RPS Elementary Schools

By Ruth W. Feldman, RPS Communications Coordinator

We often hear our district leaders discussing the importance of “meeting a student where she/he is at.” How does one do that for ALL students? I started to understand how this is actually accomplished when I had the opportunity to observe just that at Barlow Mountain (BMES) and Branchville (BES) Elementary Schools during three on-site professional development days, one focused on K-2 literacy, and the others on 3-5 literacy.

This on-site literacy training in our elementary schools is one of the most comprehensive professional development programs happening in Ridgefield Public Schools and offers our educators the most up to date and deeply researched methods on how to best instruct students in reading and writing literacy. On ten days over the school year, six expert professional developers from [Teacher's College Reading and Writing Project](#), (TCRWP,) descend on three of our six schools that have been designated as lab sites, Barlow Mountain (with Scotland) Branchville (with Veterans Park) and Ridgebury (with Farmingville.) Each school has a sister school to team with at the 3 sites. TCRWP itself is a think tank organization, within Teacher's College, in the field of literacy that offers publications and training on current best practices to enhance teaching repertoire and increase student skills, independence, and self-direction in literacy.



At the lab sites the TCRWP developers provide a full-immersion, state of the art literacy training for our principals, literacy specialists, ELL, special education and general education teachers. The experts teach a lesson to the educators, then model it in our classrooms, our educators practice it in our classrooms, then they return to the training room to review, collaborate, and coach each other on the experience. Keith Margolus, principal of BES, compares the TCRWP professional development to the medical rounds model where a team of doctors focus in on real cases with actual patients in a hospital. In these situations, the work becomes much more tangible, and deep learning can occur. (Photo: Principal Margolus working one-on-one with student at lab site.)

Susan Gately, principal at Farmingville Elementary School (FES), finds this program supports the growth mindset that she and her staff see as a key ingredient for 21st Century learners. “Growth mindset is all about being open to new learning,” she says, “This training is all student centered and their growth as readers and writers; so much of this is about good instruction as well, and the same thing applies to math and any discipline. It is all based on the students. Our students come to us to ready to learn and we need to keep pace with them and we need to keep learning too.”

Essentially, our educators are learning from the TCRWP Lab in the same way they are being taught to teach. The teachers will teach a lesson to the whole class, then ask them to work with their partner (in K-2 classes) or in their book clubs (3-5 classes) with their just right books. A just right book is one that the student can read without adult help yet still engages them cognitively so they can practice the skills and strategies they need to become a proficient reader. A teacher begins their individualized instruction and meeting a child where he/she is at with research in a one-on-one or small group lesson. During a reading or writing period that last for a minimum of 30 minutes, he/she

observes the work of a student, then he/she compliments the student on observable growth they are making in a specific skill, and either encourages more work in that area as a next step or introduces a new concept. The teacher



logs the interaction and moves on to other individual students or a small group who are working on the same skill and continues around the classroom. This is happening every day and our teachers have to give the utmost attention to each student. According to Ms. Gately, “It gets messy sometimes; we don’t always get it right, but we are trained to recognize our mistake, correct it, and just like the student, continue growing.”

Photo: Here students are working to find the “main idea” in a short article after the teacher has given a mini-lesson; the teacher immediately receives coaching by TCRWP developers.

“It is very very powerful. It feels so amazing for a child to hear they are doing well, not just a great job, thumbs up, but being really specific about both their strengths and the next step,” exclaimed Ms. Gately. I became curious about the skill sets a teacher needs now in order to apply this kind of individualized teaching. Ms. Gately believes that, “the key skill set (our teachers) need is an awareness of the scope and sequence about where the children are going and where they can go. The learner doesn’t necessarily know what they have learned and what more there is to learn. A teacher does. The teacher, having mastered the content, helps the child see their own learning and set a path for their continued growth in line with the curriculum.”

Jacqueline Doty, FES’s literacy specialist shared an example of the work in action with a 5th grader:

“If I were talking with a student about a book that they were reading, and as I was listening I figured out that she was reading a fantasy book, I figured out that she could tell what was happening at the beginning, she was talking a lot about the setting and then she was listing the problems that some of characters encountered ... If I were listening to that student I would think, ok, wow, she loves fantasy, that is great—she has found a genre she is passionate about and I would think about how she can recognize the setting and how it plays a role in the book, and I can also think about how she is sequencing events that make sense. What might I teach into next if she is really strong into that [is] I might dig a little deeper and ask her what she thinks about the characters. I might push her to think about that and if she hasn’t thought about the characters, I might encourage her to think about the main character and how the main character is interacting with the rest of the characters and what kind of person that is. She then may go back to the book and reread, and at a future point I would coach her on how to do that. So see, I am naming her strength, I’m teaching her something, then she

is trying it out and then I'm going to work with her on it. I will go back to her again and see how she is doing with that work and may give her some secondary character work if I see her progressing."



There are several unique aspects to this training that makes it so effective. The inclusiveness of the training opens doors for collaborative learning among our educators. The on-site lab provides opportunity to learn in a familiar setting thereby making it easier to immediately see how it can be applied in Ridgefield, in our teaching and learning spaces using our materials. Our educators gain skill sets in real-time, enabling them to apply new understandings the very next day. With our principals on board, teachers know that they will be supported by an informed administration and our literacy specialist can coach our teachers using a common language and understanding of best practices.

Photo: TCRWP Developer models a lesson in the classroom as BES and VP educators observe.

Mr. Margolis is inspired by what he sees happening in the classrooms, "We are fortunate to have Teachers College training; we receive the best and brightest thoughts in academia today on how to instruct literacy and in a practical way, right here in Ridgefield, at Branchville."

Heather Reed, our district K-5 Literacy chairperson, was one of the many advocates for bringing TCRWP to all of our elementary schools. When she first came to Ridgefield 21 years ago she was a fifth grade teacher at Scotland Elementary School which was then a lab site for the Teacher's College Writing Program. Ms. Reed knew how much it had helped her and her students; "When the opportunity came in the position I have now, I knew we already used their books, many of us attended their summer institute and followed them on social media; it seemed like a natural step to reach out to them in order to continue growing our work." Since there is a wait list to become a lab site, it took several years of conversation with TCRWP to become a project district. It began three years ago as a pilot program at Ridgebury Elementary, with all Ridgebury teachers attending and a few from our other schools. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, so with support at the district level, it was rolled out to all elementary schools for all educators.

Ms. Reed explained that "partnering with TCRWP is more than just staff developers coming to work with our teachers, it is a constant tie that binds us together about what is really important when it comes to instruction. We have 24 hour access to a powerful think tank. Since we partner with TCRWP it elevates all—the students, the teachers, the administration."

Last year in a presentation to the Board of Education, Ms. Reed shared that the cost of this literacy training for the 2015-2016 school year was \$3.26 per student based on 2,024 students. The cost per teacher is \$440, compared to most workshops costing between \$800 to \$900 for a week's tuition in addition to travel cost; certainly a value in more ways than one.

So each day in the district, in kindergarten through 5th grade, one can count on their student having at least 30 minutes or more of reading time, that they will work independently, in groups, and with their teacher to grow as readers and writers. You know they will receive positive confirmation of their specific successes and be coached in

skill sets that assist them to navigate through the learning. And we also know that each day, with the support of the TCRWP, our teachers are constantly working to improve their instruction in ways that meet each child where they are and to keep growing. Everyone is learning. As Ms. Gately sees it, "learning never ends."

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