
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

George Hersey Robertson School
Coventry, CT

Video Transcript: Supporting Student Writers

Kara Hennessey, K-12 Literacy Specialist: So I think some of our success here at GHR in making our writing program so strong was, first, starting with a professional development resource that was strongly vetted, and that we all agreed met most of the needs of our students. And that was Columbia's Teachers College writing units. And then the second part that we needed to do is we needed to look at our students, and ground our decisions in data and how we might want to adapt that program.

Halley Welz, Reading and Language Arts Consultant: I think a major thing that changed was that our writing kind of went from prescriptive one size fits all, everybody doing the same thing, and kind of teacher centered, you know, a lot of like the teachers showing you exactly what it should look like, and then it shifted to more time with kids writing and authentic writing.

Jennifer DeRagon, Principal: If you were to visit GHR now and view our writing instruction, you would see the writer's workshop implemented across all classrooms and grade levels. Teachers might be modeling their own writing. Our teachers share exemplars of high quality writing looks like. They really want to make it explicit. What is great writing, across all different genres. What's a great narrative introduction, what's a great conclusion and definitely aspects of author's craft. What makes writing interesting to people, as a reader.

Eileen Sokola, Grade 3 Teacher: What other districts can learn from GHR would be to have students conference with each other. One of the things that I find is so great about peer conferences is that, these students become leaders. They learn empathy and they also, during those peer conferences, they're held accountable. They have to have something written and they have to be a really good listener in order for it to be a great pair.

Celia, Grade 5 Student: If somebody would, like if somebody came up to ask me like, "Oh I need help on my story. I want to make it better. I don't how, could you give me some advice?" I would probably say like, "Add your own spin on it. Put what you think that would fit the most in it, and then maybe add on like add some descriptive or dialogue or figurative language or something like that to make it even better."

Eileen Sokola: One way that we show students how valuable the writing process is, is we hang up their unfinished work. We hang up those beautiful drafts with cross outs and with goals written on them. I will take a student's piece and say, "Hey, let's look at this." They've added setting into their writing. Let's look at the words that they used", and really it shows students that everybody's at different places in their writing and it's all great, and it's more about getting better with our writing.

Jennifer DeRagon: Our philosophy regarding writing instruction, is really about teaching our students to write like real writers do in the real world. And to do that, it has to be authentic. So, they need the ability to write across different genres. They need the ability to write on topics of choice, and so, while we follow the units of study, there's still a lot of flexibility in there to make sure that students are motivated to write about things that they are really passionate about. I think making sure that it is authentic and that when they publish a piece, it goes to a real audience.

Halley Welz: If they have a real world application that can reach out into their community then they will see that their words can make change and that gives them power and it changes writing from being a task that we have to do to something that we want to do to participate in our community. We, in third grade, have a Tara Farms fundraiser every year where the kids organize a stuffed animal day to raise money for a local animal shelter um and so the kids will persuade people with these giant posters full of writing of reasons why we need to raise for this local farm.

Jennifer DeRagon: I think in order to do any sort of school-wide change or major initiative, teachers and the whole staff need to buy-in to a common rationale and that big why. So, they need to see examples of maybe what's not going so well in a certain area and reflect upon that and really have that sense of urgency and driving need that something needs to change to help students do better. To do this, we looked at student writing samples across grade levels. And, as we analyzed writing samples and used common rubrics with common language, we began to see our areas of need.

Sarah Woodin, Grade 5 Teacher: We used to teach just one genre of writing per grade level and now we teach three. And it has really shown students that you can write for a variety of purposes and it's increased their engagement. So when we first shifted it was overwhelming for all of us because many of us had only taught one genre of writing, but we had support from Teachers College. We met as grade levels to work through the lessons and see what worked and what didn't, and we got through it. And it was worthwhile in the end.

Reese, Grade 5 Student: I would say if you're doing an informational piece, research as much as you possibly can because you think you might know everything about your topic, but there's usually more to learn. And then for other genres of writing, like narrative and memoir and poetry and stuff, you should just, like, don't be afraid to put how you felt at that moment, you know you can say whatever you want.

Jennifer DeRagon: As a principal, one of things that I really keep in mind, is both ways to protect time for teachers to plan their writing instruction and also to provide ongoing coaching. Ongoing PD is really necessary to keep things in motion. So, when you look at scheduling, coaching, PD times, we are looking to make sure that that's protected, valued time for teachers to work together with grade level teams and with our K-12 literacy consultant, every six weeks.