



GEORGE M. DAVIS JR. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
80 ISELIN DRIVE
NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK 10804

ANTHONY BAMBROLA
PRINCIPAL

LAURIE MARINARO
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

Letter from the Principal
September 2019

Davis Families,

And, we're off! Our teachers treasure this time early in the school year to build relationships, develop a sense of community in the classroom, and, of course, assess! Now, I don't mean that in the intimidating way that "assessment" can come off these days, but honestly, we're always informally assessing (most often by just observing and talking), especially early in the school year.

One first step for classroom teachers is reviewing our student portfolios that travel from the previous year's teacher to their new homeroom teacher. In that folder is usually a writing sample, a 1:1 reading assessment (some of you have sat in parent-teacher conferences and looked at a DRA or a F&P reading assessment – more on that in a moment), and other possible artifacts.

Additionally, we benchmark our students three times a year across the district with a more standardized assessment. Now, these are nothing intense and are often pretty quick. For example, in our earliest grades, these are as simple as letter name/sound check-ins administered one-to-one. Most schools and districts, responsible for tracking student progress and growth, use periodic benchmarks for a snapshot of performance, as well as for teams to assess student eligibility for additional intervention services. In past years, we have used literacy assessments through AimsWeb (K-2nd) and literacy/math assessments through STAR (2nd to 5th). Well, starting this year, there is no more STAR. At least, not for us in New Rochelle. We'll be AimsWeb PLUS for K-5th. The system, and assessments, launch this first week in October.

However, our teachers have been getting to know our students since they arrived in early September – reading with them, looking at writing samples, and even simply having class and small group conversations. Our teachers are pretty talented and know how to learn a lot about our young friends in so many different ways. Don't worry too much about fancy words like AimsWeb – our teachers will let you know when we need your help in addressing an area of need.

One example of how our teachers are really getting to know your children in reading is through administering simple, but comprehensive, 1:1 reading assessments. These usually start with, "Hey, you want to come read with me?" Now, for the child, this experience is an opportunity to read one-on-one with the teacher in a pocket of the room. I mean, how fun and what attention! But, for the teacher, these assessments capture so much helpful info on our growing readers. For several years, we've been using an assessment called the DRA. However, we're slowly transitioning to a new system by Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) that better aligns to our core curriculum, and frankly, we think is a bit more accurate in matching our kids to just-right books. Grades 1, 4 and 5 are already launching these new assessments and 2nd and 3rd have had their initial training, with K following next month. By next September, we'll be fully rolled over. However, I am going to throw out a disclaimer – with the new assessment system comes some level adjustments, as we become a bit more accurate in matching our kids to levels. So, what does that mean for my child? Well, there's a chance a reader who was reading R books might now be best matched to Q books. And, you know what? That's okay. :)

It's for this reason, and many more, that we were excited to do a workshop on reading levels with our parents because, too often, the level manifests as, like, a scarlet letter. And, can you imagine being in a teacher's shoes and having to talk with a kid about choosing books in a leveled-down bin? Oh, goodness! (Note – this happens for those readers who don't read during the summer, often).

You've seen our email blasts and flyers. We'll be hosting two workshops on 'De-Mystifying Reading Levels' this month – the first on **Thursday, October 3rd** at Davis (9:00 a.m.) and another on **Thursday, October 17th** at the New Rochelle Public Library (6:00 p.m.), because for many families, NRPL is easier to access.

Our new Literacy Coach, Kelly Neault – who you are going to love interacting with – is going to break down some of the misconceptions around reading levels. Like a sneak preview, however, I can say this...levels

are not everything! Students are not 'Q' readers. A child is not a 'Q'. Books are leveled. Books can be a Level 'Q' or 'F' or 'M'...there's a system and each level has distinct characteristics of the text that make them unique and, it's our goal (with those 1:1 assessments) to figure out how to put what we call "just right" books into each child's hands. Because, when we match kids to "just right" books, it's *one* BIG way that we can help promote reading growth.

I used the analogy at Back-to-School Night...think about lifting weights. When you want to build muscle, you figure out what that "just right" amount is and you add a bit more weight as a healthy challenge. Over a bit of time, that weight becomes easier and you're ready to add a bit more. If you add too much, it's going to be quite hard. When you work with too easy of weight, that also will be hard to promote growth.

Bottom line - "just right" books are super helpful for instruction, because teachers are amazing at assessing their group, looking at the range of levels and more nuanced needs of readers, and doing small group instruction that targets all students' individual needs. That's how they meet all of those needs in the room - and they're good at it.

But, "just right" books are not enough. We still have to promote a *love* for reading. And this is also a BIG part of reading growth and what Kelly will talk about at our workshops. Sure, we want to get those right texts into kids' hands, but if a child wants to read a book off level...or this cool graphic novel...or something else, you know what? We have to let them sometimes! Now, navigating this in school and at home is always a good conversation with your teacher at your conference. We will never seek to stifle interest in books. I don't care how "high of a level" my son reads when he heads to middle school in several years if he doesn't *love* reading. That's my number one goal as a parent. But, I can't force him. It's never easy. :)

When it comes to dialogue with your teacher at the parent-teacher conference, don't worry about the level, but instead, re-direct interest towards what your young reader *can* do and what s/he is working on *mastering next*. Your teacher will be able to give you a lot of specific insight. There's so much within a level, one student primarily reading Level Q texts is not the same and has different needs than another Q reader.

In short, a big question to ask yourself when you think about how your child is growing as a reader - do they enjoy reading? That's not a bad start. Read together. Read aloud to them. Try out magazines. Some digital reading experiences are great. There's a lot you can do, along with our team, to help nurture this lifelong love for reading and writing. We've only just left the dock on our journey this year - we'll be here with you the whole way!

Anthony Bambrola
Principal

anthonybambrola@nredlearn.org