

Dear Parents,

Given some of the recent press around *The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project*, I have created this document of Frequently Asked Questions regarding our literacy program here at the Bronxville School.

### **What are the components of a strong literacy program?**

A strong literacy program includes several components, such as the ability to decode (sound out words) and encode (spell), which is part of phonics instruction. Phonics alone would not be enough to address all the components of a strong literacy program, which also include comprehension strategies, inferencing, vocabulary, developing fluency, exposure to the various genres and types of texts, analyzing writer's craft and structure, opportunities to construct narratives, argument and informational writing pieces.

### **What is phonics and why is it important?**

Phonics instruction involves teaching students to decode words (read them by sounding out individual letters or teams of letters) . Phonics instruction also involves encoding which is the ability to hear all the sounds in a word to write it, commonly referred to as spelling.

There are many concepts in phonics that students are taught in Kindergarten through second grade. They include but are not limited to short vowels, digraphs (like the th in math), consonant blends like fl in flop, silent e, bossy r like in car where the bossy r changes the sound of the vowel, and even snap words, words seen frequently in print that often don't follow spelling rules that students must memorize.

### **What is the district's approach to the teaching of Phonics?**

The Bronxville School has a long history of teaching phonics. In the past we have used a program called Cool Rules. Several years ago, our K-2 teachers visited a number of schools to observe various phonics programs and selected the phonics program developed by Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, which became our whole class curriculum for students in Kindergarten, first and second grades.

### **What is our current literacy curriculum?**

In terms of our K-2 phonics curriculum, we utilize programs that are multisensory, research based, follow a sequence, and provide direct and explicit instruction. Third and fourth grade uses a Words Their Way curriculum to address spelling.

Beyond phonics, our curriculum utilizes the reading and writing Units of Study that were developed through Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP). To offer a few examples, students in third grade read a book and engage in character study. They then write a "baby lit" essay in which they create a thesis statement that includes a trait of the character they studied and students must provide evidence to support that thesis, all while learning how to structure an essay. Fifth grade students end their year by reading fantasy books such as, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and write their own fantasy stories, one uniquely titled, *Lamp of Wishes*.

In middle school, students read a work of fiction and write a Companion Book, where they explore the elements of the story, theme, symbolism, the setting of the story and its importance, as well as the author's craft, and are encouraged to engage in fan fiction as to what happens

next. This is all done in addition to many opportunities for literary analysis and argument based writing.

We find these units of study to be engaging for our students while helping them to grow as readers and writers. All teachers are supportive of the Units of Study in reading and writing. We make a distinction between the reading and writing instruction and phonics in the sense that all of these components are necessary to prepare our students as readers and writers. Additionally, as stated previously, the reading and writing Units of Study or phonics alone would not provide a curriculum that would prepare our students for meeting the ELA standards of NY State.

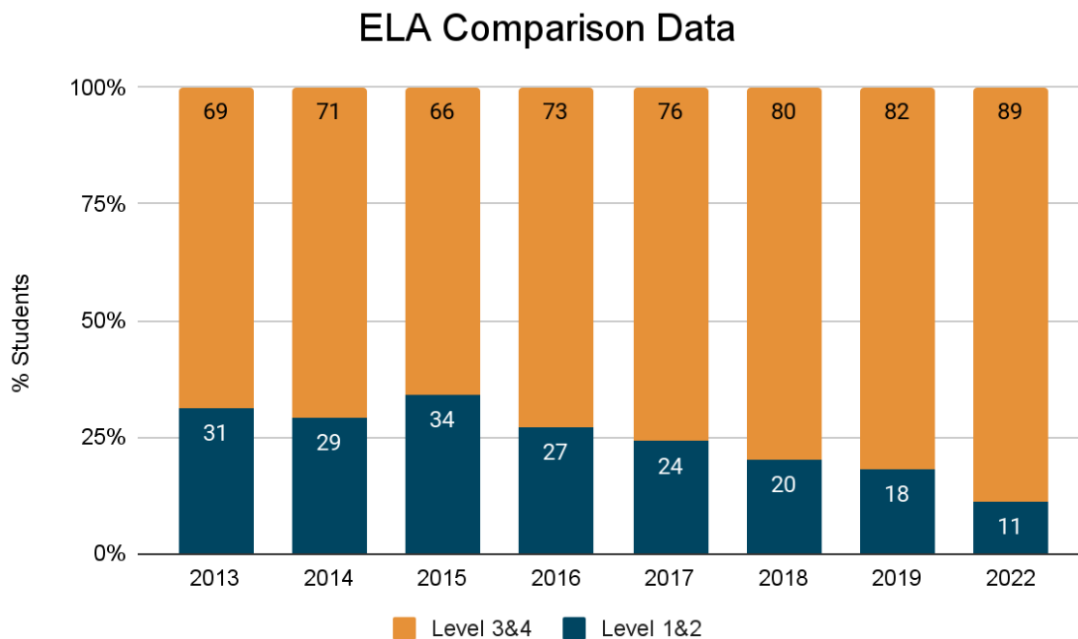
### **Do our teachers have flexibility in delivering curriculum?**

In terms of student achievement data, it is imperative that the curriculum be consistent across grades and vertically aligned between grades. Our teachers often engage in reteaching when needed, and pacing of curriculum is adjusted given the performance of our students as well as pre-assessment data.

### **How do we evaluate our work in literacy?**

In addition to phonics and spelling assessments, our students take a STAR Reading assessment multiple times a year. Teachers have students read to them and ask comprehension questions. Students are assessed with on demand writing pieces that are scored with common rubrics, and, we analyze our New York State ELA scores.

Below you will see the growth in the number of students in grades 3-8 considered proficient (scoring levels 3 and 4) over a significant period. Of note, the work with TCRWP began in 2014.



Additionally, in 2021 we gave the PISA assessment, which is an assessment that compares students' achievement levels internationally.

Below are our results from testing a randomly selected group of 90 fifteen year old Bronxville High School Students.

## PISA Reading 2021



Our students performed well above students across the country and internationally.

### **Are you considering any changes to the literacy program?**

We have a strong practice of using data to inform our instruction and guide us in making decisions about curriculum as well as for assisting our students for whom extra support is needed.

In third grade, the beginning of the year assessment using Words Their Way, the current spelling curriculum, was consistent with historical third grade pre-assessment data. Therefore, the third grade will continue with the Words Their Way curriculum. They will supplement with additional dictation lists and begin the program in September as opposed to mid October. Words Their Way is a highly differentiated program and developmentally appropriate for intermediate elementary students. Our fourth grade also utilizes this spelling curriculum.

In both second and first grades, we will implement a more intensive phonics program dedicating more time daily to phonics instruction by focusing on one phonics skill per week instead of multiple phonic skills per week. Kindergarten will maintain their current phonics curriculum. All grades implement small group instruction for students who need a more intensive approach.

### **Is my child over reliant on a cueing system when reading?**

A cueing system is where a young child might rely on a picture in the text to read an unknown work or what the first letter says and what might “fit”. In K-2, there was a correlation between reading levels and decoding ability, meaning students who read on grade level A, B, C, D, etc. can also decode. Assessments for decoding often have made up words and reading assessment texts do not contain pictures. From this data, we can conclude that our students are not reliant on cueing, guessing using pictures, or context clues in order to read. This is not to say that a child might never do that when reading a picture book but it is not a core strategy.

### **What happens if my child is struggling in reading or writing?**

We have a very strong Response to Intervention (RTI) process in place. Based on assessment data, a student is presented at the RTI team meeting at which time a Tier 1 intervention, generally small group instruction in the classroom, will be recommended. Based on the assessment data and the teacher having an intervention in place for six weeks, if the student

does not show improvement they will be referred to the RTI committee where further targeted interventions are discussed and outlined. The classroom teacher puts those interventions into place for another six weeks and progress is monitored. If the student is not making adequate progress, a second intervention is outlined and new targeted goals are put in place. If there is still not adequate progress, a student may be recommended for Skills support outside of the classroom.

**Did the pandemic, specifically remote learning, wearing masks and learning behind plexiglass shields, affect students' literacy skill development?**

It's difficult to pinpoint if these specific factors negatively impacted our students' literacy skills. However, what we do know is that we continued to monitor every student's progress in all aspects of reading which helped us determine what, if any, changes in instruction were warranted.

**What effect does private tutoring have on our students' reading abilities?**

Parents make the decision as to whether their child will be privately tutored, for a variety of reasons. Given the School does not know exactly who is being tutored, and for what reasons, it is difficult to know for certain, the impact of private tutoring on any one student's progress.

**What does it mean that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project is changing its name?**

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has been reconstituted as Advancing Literacy at Teachers College and new leadership has been put in place. They will continue to support us in our reading and writing Units of Study.

I hope this helps to clarify the components of our literacy curriculum and instruction. The Bronxville School faculty are highly experienced literacy teachers and are skilled in giving each child what they need. An overreliance on one program over another is not the goal; rather, our teachers have multiple strategies in their instructional repertoire and can differentiate for individual students as needed to ensure everyone's success.

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