



Setting Sail:

Newsletter of the Partnership for Inquiry

November 2004

Volume 1, Issue 2

The Rochester Region
Early Childhood
Partnership for
Inquiry in
Professional
Learning

State University of New
York- Geneseo

Children's Center of
Brighton &
Children's Center of
Brighton 2

Family Learning Center

Rochester Museum and
Science Center
Preschool

Seton Catholic
Preschool

Council Rock Primary
School

Early Childhood School
of Rochester, RCSD
#57

Genesee Community
Charter School

Harley Lower School

William C. Munn
Elementary School
Spencerport

Anchors Away! A Partnership Getting-to-Know-You Gathering

On November 18th, about 15 members of the Early Childhood University-School Partnership met for a Getting-To-Know-You Gathering at the Gannett School, Rochester Museum and Science Center. Participants included representatives from Munn Elementary School, the Rochester Museum and Science Center Preschool, the Genesee Community Charter School, Harley Lower School, Council Rock Primary School, Seton Catholic Preschool, the SUNY Geneseo Early Childhood Advisory Council, and the SUNY Geneseo Young Children's Council as well as SUNY Geneseo Early Childhood faculty.



Participants listen to and think about the innovative practices that others describe.

After informal introductions, brief conversations, and refreshments, we broke into three discussion groups to share ideas for innovative practices,

parent involvement strategies, inquiry projects, and local expeditions or excursions. The ideas and examples shared were varied and highlighted significant current practices.

Representatives from Munn Elementary School shared a handout showing their Primary Literacy Wall, a display of children's individual reading levels across the primary grades. The display represents 30 reading levels. On the display, one level might include students in three different classrooms. As part of their new Reading Recovery program, the faculty uses the display to discuss curriculum planning. To coordinate their efforts, teachers meet every two weeks for discussion of children's progress and joint planning. The teachers discuss how to move all students forward with their reading progress. In this way, the teachers work as a team to improve the children's reading skills.

A teacher from the Genesee Community Charter School shared a long-term project completed by first grade children. The topic was dinosaurs and other living things from that era. As a culminating activity, the first graders created for the kindergartners an interactive museum based on what the first graders had (Continued on page 6)

Welcome Aboard: The Family Learning Center



The teachers develop centers around observed student interests.

The Family Learning Center on Hart Street in Rochester houses numerous programs to aid refugee families. One of the programs is the Universal Pre-K Program. This program enrolls 38 students, between the ages of three and four, split into two classes randomly. Each classroom has two full time teachers. Because parents of the children are in the building, they frequently visit the classroom. Because this UPK serves refugee families, the ethnic makeup of the program is always changing. The ethnic makeup usually comes in waves based on events in the rest of the world at the time. The students come from many different countries.

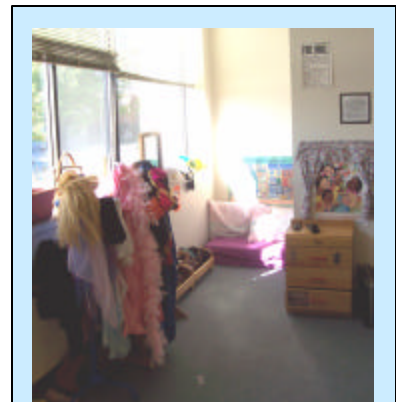
The teachers spend a lot of time observing the students and looking for developmental milestones in order to plan the curriculum. The program is child-centered, but the students follow a regular classroom routine and the teachers believe they thrive on that. The teachers develop centers around observed student interests. Right now, they are focusing on planting. They read the story *Pumpkin Jack*, where a pumpkin rots and then winter comes but

when spring comes there is a new pumpkin plant. The class has a pumpkin rotting outside the classroom window to see if a new pumpkin plant will grow in the spring. Students also have planted other seeds, such as apple seeds. The teachers try to encourage a lot of group work. For example, out of blocks, the students will create something related to what they are learning and as they continue learning, the students keep adding to their creation. The students have taken numerous trips to places in their community and outside their community. They have visited pumpkin farms, the fire department, Brueggers' Bagels, the library, the planetarium, the zoo, and the Buffalo aquarium. After returning from a trip, one frequent project is to create a book about the trip.

One way the teachers can tell that the students are learning is by looking through the portfolio that they create for each student. This portfolio is passed along to the kindergarten teacher. They also look at the child's High Scope Core Assessment. Each teacher takes a lot of notes throughout the day while observing the children. They spend time sharing these notes with their co-teachers and discussing where each child is academically and socially. The teachers also turn to the students themselves. Students are allowed to put up their work in the classroom if they want. When a student is learning, he/she will replace his/her old work with his/her new work by him/herself. Students will put up work that they are proud of. Therefore the teachers have to

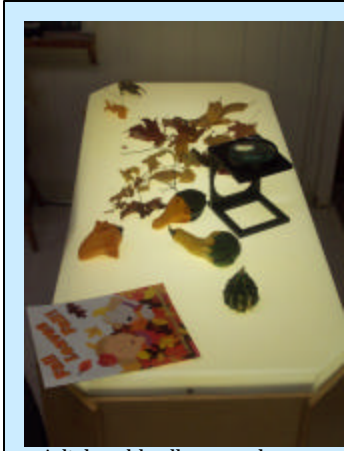
pay attention to how the work on the walls is changing.

This preschool program has a unique opportunity for connections with parents. While the children are in preschool, their parents are in the building attending classes, such as vocational, language, or citizenship classes. This allows the parents to eat lunch with their children. The preschool program also has what they call after lunch share time. After lunch, the parents come into the classroom with their children, and everyone sits in a circle, including the teachers. The teacher then shares some student work and also suggests other activities that the parents can do at home to help their children learn English among other things. These suggestions are shared in a written newsletter as well but since many of the parents do not speak a lot of English, being able to see the teacher demonstrate activities is a great help. One day a week the class and parents go into the school library and check out books.



A comfortable nook with pillows for students and/or parents to sit and read a book or just talk.

Ship Ahoy: Seton Catholic Preschool



A light table allows students to view and explore objects in a different way.

Seton Catholic Preschool is a Reggio Emilia inspired school. The curriculum is child originated and teacher framed producing a negotiated curriculum. The school enrolls 126 students, ranging from ages three to five. The four and five year olds are mixed together in classes, while the three year olds have their own classes. The four and five year old classes have about eighteen students per class. The three-year-old classes have about fourteen.

The teachers at Seton listen to and observe the children and from there plan the curriculum. The projects developed in the classrooms are discovery-oriented, especially for science. A lot of emphasis is placed on critical thinking. One investigation that some students just finished is "A Pumpkin: Does It Float Or Sink?" During this project, the students tested other objects first and then tested the pumpkin. To do this, the pumpkin was placed in a large bucket under the water table. The water table was filled with water. The students pulled the table's plug and watched the

water fill up the bucket holding the pumpkin to see if it would float or sink.

Not all project activities or investigations take place inside the classroom. The school is affiliated with the Rochester Museum and Science Center. In the past, a project that was coordinated with the museum included three different trips to the museum and a visit from museum workers to the school. Another project focused on a large and colorful garden of a neighbor. In this case, the children were learning about five different artists and went outside to paint this garden. They ended up meeting the owner, who turned out to be an artist herself. On another walk around the neighborhood, the class observed a building nearby being torn down. Each week, the students went to visit the site to see the new building that was being built. The students drew pictures of the progress being made. When the new drugstore finally was finished, the manager invited the class in for a tour of the store. Another class visited Montana Mills and then proceeded to investigate bread and how it is made.

Planning the curriculum is not the only reason that the teachers observe and listen to the students. They also observe and listen to the students to determine what they are actually learning. Kathy Burton, Director of Seton, says that if a student can tell you what they have done or explain how something works or how they did something they have learned. Teachers use such observations to evaluate the effectiveness of their projects. To document the students' learning and to share it with others, the teachers use

digital cameras. Photographs often are enlarged and then placed with captions in a display panel that explains the different steps of a project.

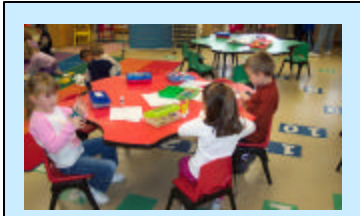
Seton involves the families of the students through regular newsletters and parent meetings, and by inviting them into the classroom. This helps parents to understand the Reggio Emilia philosophy used. Numerous special events also are held that involve the children's families. In April, during The Month of The Young Child, the preschool hosts a family international dinner. Each family brings a dish representing their heritage. The children make the centerpieces and also create a flag representing their family's national origin. At the beginning of each school year, a cocktail party is held at one of the parent's homes. Although the teachers are invited to this, the real purpose is for the parents to get to know one another.

Seton Catholic Preschool wholeheartedly supports and believes in a Reggio Emilia philosophy. They explain upfront to the parents of students attending Seton that this is the approach being used. No new teachers are hired unless they too believe in the Reggio Emilia philosophy and are willing to learn more about it.



Mirrors are placed under objects to motivate student exploration.

Welcome Aboard: Munn Elementary School



The uniquely shaped tables allow for students to spread out their work.

Munn Elementary School aligns their curriculum with the New York State Learning Standards. Each summer, curriculum teams revise their curriculum to follow the Standards. Each year, they go deeper into the curriculum. Teachers use Differentiated Instruction, which allows teachers to challenge all students instead of just teaching to those in the middle. The teachers also use flexible grouping within their classrooms to group students according to their individual readiness. Each individual advances through the groups at their own pace, instead of waiting for the whole group to move together. The school has its own full-time enrichment specialist who works with the teachers at Munn Elementary. Unlike some other schools where the enrichment specialist pulls out the higher achieving students, their enrichment specialist works with all students. The school also is focusing on students developing higher levels of critical thinking. Teachers continually do assessments, both formal and informal to make sure that the students are learning.

The teachers are currently using a program called Math Investigations where students

explore and discover math concepts. This program has had a positive impact on state assessment scores.

Teachers provide students with opportunities for cooperative learning, and the school uses community resources. For example, 4th graders recently took a trip to the Erie Canal and had the opportunity to ride on a barge. The school also brings people from the community into the school for assemblies or enrichment circles. The school has a program called Junior Achievement. In this program, different people from the community come into the school and work with 2nd graders during five sessions. The students learn about different community resources, which is a large part of the 2nd grade curriculum.

Munn Elementary has 384 students in grades K-5. The kindergarten program is half-day. There are 3 classes at each grade level. Each classroom had one main teacher and a consultant, push-in teacher for the inclusion classrooms. Munn Elementary has a full-time teacher for their ESL program. Currently students speak 15 different languages throughout the school.

The school emphasizes families being involved in the students' learning. Results of major tests are sent home, ongoing parent-teacher conferences occur, and 5-week reports are sent home. The teachers believe that there should never be any surprises for the parents when they get the 5-week reports. Parents are invited into the classroom to help with centers and reading, to aid the teachers, and to chaperone

field trips. Currently, the school is participating in a reading incentive program where, for the first month, each family documents how much their child reads at home. No goals are set for this first month. The second month, each family sets their own goals together. This process is continued with the families setting their own goals each month. The last family event held was called "Munnster Mash." Parents decorated the gym. In the evening, students came back with their families for a Halloween Party. Teachers were in their rooms and the students went Trick or Treating in the school. This is the 3rd year that the school has held this event, and it has been more successful each year. Another event the school has held is called "Breakfast with Books." Parents get letters asking them what type of books their children like. Both the children and the families are invited to breakfast, where there are book talks and books are read.

Noteworthy is the willingness of staff and parents at Munn Elementary to offer new learning opportunities for children. They both look for a way to implement new ideas that a parent or teacher has. The school staff really has a partnership with the parents. The school and families are a close-knit community.



Children in kindergarten and 1st grade work in groups, in pairs, and individually.

Ship Ahoy: Genesee Community Charter School

Genesee Community Charter School (GCCS) has a distinctive learning culture distinctive that involves faculty collaboration, expectations of quality, and building a caring community. Director Lisa Wing says this is a great place to see theories you read about put into action.

The school, located next to the Rochester Museum and Science Center, enrolls 204 students from kindergarten to 6th grade, with one class for each grade level. Each classroom has about 30



Above is an example of a comfortable reading space.

The classrooms are set up quite deliberately. All classrooms have tables with chairs, a large rug area, and lots of shelving. The early childhood classrooms also have a dramatic play area, sand and water tables, easels, and comfortable reading spaces. The reason that the classrooms have tables instead of single desks is because the students do a lot of small group work. The students sit at the tables with their "crew." Students and teachers participate in Expeditionary Learning, which views learning as an adventure into the unknown. At the end of what can be a challenging journey, is

a huge final project. The final project almost always includes a real audience of families and community members. The final project includes many different ways of representing the students' learning. The final event might include writing, drawing, music, talking, and pictures.

Teachers at GCCS use a lot of modeling and discovery learning. For example, the teachers provide models of a good author, and the students identify the characteristics of a good author based on the model provided. Lisa says, "Our students take an active part in investigating and contributing to solutions that address community issues." Recently the 5th grade students were asked to write and design a children's guide for the new Frederick Douglass Exhibit at the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC). The students had to make numerous trips to the museum and do field work and research to complete this task. In order to accomplish the final project, the students learned a lot. Students at GCCS often go outside the school to learn many different venues in the community to learn. On each field study, the students and teachers bring sketch pads, notepads, cameras, and other items they might need to collect information.

Because the students take such an active role in their learning and their end product affects real people, they have a sense of accountability and concern for their work. For example, during a 2nd grade trip to a graveyard, it started to rain. The students

made a circle around all of their field notes and held the umbrellas over the field notes instead of themselves! GCCS teachers use both formal and informal observations to see if the students are learning in their classroom. Each of the students creates a portfolio that the teachers review. But the teachers really use the pieces leading up to the end project and the end project itself to evaluate their students' learning. Parents are often in the building. Some parents come in on a regular basis while others come in to help with certain events. Parents help with lunch, work with students, go on expeditions, serve as an expert on a topic, and act as an apprentice or as a chaperone. This week, three classes had Exhibition Night. The students presented their learning to their families and to the community. Exhibits are held three times a year.

Expeditionary Learning Seminar

GCCS invites you to "Building A Culture of Quality." This is Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound Seminar will be held at GCCS on January 27-28, 2005. Registration is due January 7th. For more information, contact Lisa O'Malley, Curriculum Specialist, 271-4552, ext. 462, Lomalley@GCCSchool.org

Partnership Gathering (continued)

learned through their expeditionary project. Documentation panels showed how the project developed over time.

A representative from the SUNY Geneseo Early Childhood Advisory Council and graduate student shared her recent efforts to develop a long-term project about the farm and the grocery store in her pre-kindergarten classroom. Along with excursions to a local farm and grocery store, the children engaged in discussions, artwork, emergent writing, and dramatic role-play. Parents have been encouraged to contribute grocery containers to the dramatic play area and to join the class on excursions. They have shown much interest in the documentation panel that explains and shows how the project is developing. A representative from Seton Catholic Preschool and another member of the SUNY Geneseo Early Childhood Advisory Council also shared examples of inquiry projects and documentation panels. These panels included a series of captioned photographs mounted on foam core panels. The captions and narrative explained to parents how the children were learning and how the project had progressed over time.



Benefits of the Responsive Classroom approach are shared.

We heard about a school-wide character education program that Council Rock Primary School has instituted. The themes of this program provide a unifying school message for all students and contribute to the school's overall sense of community. Representatives from Harley Lower School also addressed the children's sense of community. After participating in an in-service workshop, they adopted strategies from the Responsive Classroom approach

(www.responsiveclassroom.org) and have found that it has made a big difference in classroom and school dynamics. They also attended an in-service workshop on the writing process at Teachers College in New York City. As a result of this workshop, the value of writing and the writing process as a learning tool from the earliest ages has become more evident.



A display panel showing the artwork of children who have explored the idea of self-portraits.

Representatives from the Rochester Museum and Science Center Preschool shared a project on trees that they undertook this fall. The teachers read books about trees and, with the children, investigated tree artifacts in the museum's collection, including a large mounted slab from a tree, and took walks around the neighborhood, identifying different types of trees. The children took part in various art activities, such as bark rubbings, tree sketches, and collages of trees.



Children made tree collages during their inquiry project on trees.

After this intriguing discussion about innovative practices and inquiry projects, the group briefly turned its attention to what were perceived as professional development needs and to suggestions for advanced level preparation. A focal document for discussion was SUNY Geneseo's proposed Conceptual Framework for Graduate Programs. Among the ideas shared and discussed were: becoming involved in professional development organizations, developing collaborative, collegial relationships, spending time in or gaining experience in schools, becoming media center savvy, becoming knowledgeable about literacy development and assessment, and developing teaching portfolios.

Coming Next Issue:

- ~ More Spotlights on Partners and
- ~ Teacher Candidate Portfolios