

This Week at Central Academy

March 12, 2010

Becoming an adult, and learning how to go about that process, involves so many factors. One of the most important to us at Central is learning how to extend and deepen our thinking. In truly looking at situations around us critically and deeply, from multiple perspectives, we can begin to grow a more clear understanding of both individual and group needs of the community. This edition looks at how using democratic processes helps us to extend and enrich our students' thinking.

Realizing that each of us truly makes a difference to the total community in which we live is an important part of Central Academy's mission for students. One of the enormous ways in which you, personally, can make a difference in the Middletown community this spring is through giving your voice to support our schools and what your child is learning at Central. The next levy that will be coming out in May is critical to all of the schools in Middletown, as well as to Central Academy. We will have an opportunity in the future to talk together about it more, but at this point, it's important to know that as critical as the levy is to our school and our daily learning, it will not mean any new taxes. *No new taxes* at this point in time is important to all of us. And the continuation of all of the wonderful things that your child is learning at no extra cost is honestly one of the few wonderful gifts we can give to each other. But only if you go to the polls to have your voice heard. Please see Mrs. LeForce's article at the end of the newsletter to find details about voting and registering.

In the meantime, I hope you will take a few minutes to read the articles in our newsletter to see just how much our children are learning and experiencing. We are proud of the deepening understanding that our students are developing in academic areas as well as in social and emotional growth. We continue to celebrate together, and invite you to attend any of our evening programs or events, as well as our twice a month Celebration of Learning assemblies to see incredible examples of just how much our students are growing from the experiences they have here at Central.

Dianne

Central Academy's Website

Find out what's going on at Central by frequently visiting our website. The website includes:

Important Dates Newsletters Classroom Web pages

Pictures of Students (**You can search by student's first name, teacher name, or by level!**)

www.middletowncityschools.com

(click on Central Academy)

IMPORTANT DATES

Mar. 16	Int. musical program – 7:00 pm
Mar. 18	Skating Party – 6:30-8:30
Mar. 24	Early Release – 2:00 pm
Mar. 25	Literacy Night & Spaghetti Dinner – 5:30 – 7:00
Mar. 29	Spring Break Begins

EARLY PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

Democratic schools enhance student learning by allowing students the opportunities to be engaged in activities that interest them. The students in Mrs. Brooks' Early Primary class are given the opportunity to make choices about their learning throughout the day. One way we do this is through project time. At the end of every day students are able to choose a project time station to participate in. Some of these include: library, magnetic letter station, writing station, puzzles and games station, listening station, read and write the room station, and play-doh station. Students are able to choose any project to work on throughout the week.

When project time first began in our classroom, students were encouraged to try all of the different stations throughout the week. As time went on, students were able to choose the same project they went to a previous day if they showed interest in it. I have noticed that some students choose a variety of stations to go to throughout the week and some students choose the same station. For example, *Au'Laila* loves to write. She often chooses the writing station to write and illustrate her own books during project time. *Aby* and *Eli* often choose puzzles, and *Kirsten* often chooses the magnetic letter station where she can build words and sentences.

Providing students with a choice of where they would like to go and what they would like to work on gives students ownership of their own learning. They are choosing activities that they enjoy and that they are actively engaged in, which is when learning best takes place. It is also when a love of learning begins to evolve. A democratic school provides an environment where students have a voice in what they are doing which provides the beginning steps of building a life-long learner.

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It's sugaring time! At least it is in the Jantausch household and in Mrs. Jantausch's Early Primary room. Sugaring time is the season just as winter is ending and spring is beginning – the time when the sap begins to flow in the maple trees (or sugarbush as it is sometimes called). My husband decided that this year he was going to make his own maple syrup. This involved much research, many trips to the hardware store, and several emails to “experts” on sugaring. He was excited; so excited that he wanted to come and tap a maple tree right here on Central's property. He wanted to share his new knowledge with the Early Primary students.

Today, Mr. J. came and shared the story of maple syrup with the four Early Primary classrooms. Our class then walked out front and watched him drill into the tree, place a spile (the spigot used in tapping maple trees) into the tree, and the sap begin to flow! There were excited whisperings as the tree immediately produced clear drops of sap into the bucket.

What does this activity have to do with democratic education though? At first, I thought that it really didn't fit into this week's topic for TWAC. After all, the grownups were the ones to choose to investigate maple syrup, not the students. However, after more thinking I realized that it fit perfectly. Yes, my husband and I chose to expose the students to the process of making maple syrup, but where the kids take it will be up to them. The beauty of democratic education is that the students who are truly interested in this topic will be allowed to further explore and investigate the facets of interest to them.

Many different aspects of science and math were brought into today's activity. For instance, *Johrdon* and *Corinne* both remembered that evaporation was the name for what happens when water disappears from the sap as it is boiled. *Tenee* predicted that the sap would be up to the 2 quart mark when we checked on the bucket later in the day. Everyone was counting by 5's as we tried to figure out how many 5-gallon buckets we would need to collect the almost 50 gallons of sap required to map one gallon of syrup. Any or all of these conversations may be of special interest to someone. Given the freedom to read and explore further, some students may decide to look into tree identification. Some may want to see if there are other

liquids that evaporate like water does. Still others may have interest in using a map to locate areas rich in maple trees and known for their sugaring seasons. The possibilities are only limited by the students' curiosity.

The grownups may have started the sap flowing today, but the students and their questions will determine how long and how deep this investigation will continue. Luckily, here at Central they will have time and room to extend their thinking in as many ways as they wish. So in this way, maple syrup is not only delicious, but it is democratic!

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How does our democratic school extend student learning? What a great question! If you stop in to **Ms. Roe's classroom**, you'll more than likely see **Ms. Roe's students** at the carpet sitting in a circle on the floor or working cooperatively in groups. Many chunks of our day begin and end at our carpet area. We feel it is important that we sit in a circle so that all students feel a part of the group, all students can be seen and every voice can be heard. Each morning we start our day with our morning meeting. During this time, each student has the opportunity to share a personal experience s/he had the night before, that particular morning or that will be occurring after school. The second time around the circle, the students may ask questions or make connections to any classmate or teacher's experience.

One morning this week, *Gabe* shared that he was mad because he was tired and he didn't want to get out of bed and go to school. Several students made connections with *Gabe*! (Our students tap their chests with their hand forming a "C" when they have made a connection with something someone is saying.) Another morning, *Austin* brought in a book that he had bought from the book fair. He chose to share a page about a shark because he said, "I know *Mark* likes sharks." Our goal in Early Primary is not just to teach students the academic knowledge, but also to teach our students how to respect and think about each member of our school community. This means we often make connections to how our lives are similar, as well as extending our learning outside of our classroom.

Throughout our day visitors will also find us working cooperatively in groups, discovering and learning about topics or practicing academic and social skills. This week, *Emma S.*, *Christian*, *Bree* and *Eristan* worked together at the Science station during Project time. Together, they helped one another follow the sequence of directions for the potato experiment. They had to count and record the eyes on their individual potato, make a prediction and record how many eyes they thought would sprout, pierce the potato with toothpicks so that it would sit at the top of a cup and then fill the cup with water so that about half of the potato was in the water. What teamwork!

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Mrs. Uhl, Mr. Jarrell & Ms. Stillwell's Early Primary Class is a community of learners that participates in democratic values. In our classroom we strive to allow each student to have a voice and actively play a part in making decisions that affect their lives.

The students are learning to take ownership over their own learning. The other day, *MyOnna* was upset with another classmate because he made a comment about how he could count higher than her. So, instead of having one of the teachers resolve the problem for her, *MyOnna* told the student that when he said those things it really hurt her feelings. Then she asked him to please stop saying those hurtful things. The little boy immediately said he didn't realize what he had said had hurt her feelings and that he was very sorry. *MyOnna* forgave the boy and instantly felt better.

Recently, we implemented a "Singing Circle" that we do each afternoon on days when the students have completed their work. On one particular day, the students had a really difficult day completing their work and getting along with one another. So, we decided to gather as a class and determine whether or not they felt they deserved to have "Singing Circle" that day. *Paige*, *Tye* and *Kyler* felt that we didn't deserve to

have the “Singing Circle” because our class had not made smart choices. Several students did not finish their work, some got into arguments and we didn’t work collaboratively.

On the other hand *Lexey*, *Ariel* and *Josie* felt that we should have “Singing Circle” because we had improved our behavior and some people in our class did finish their work and get along well with others. At first the class wanted to take a vote. However, after further discussion we realized that it was not about which answer gets more votes, but whether our class as a whole acted as a true example of a community of learners. After much debate, the class decided that they had not done their best and should not have “Singing Circle.” They felt it was wise to try to make better choices and earn their “Singing Circle” the next day. Through this process we discovered that our best opportunities to grow arise from learning from our mistakes.

LATE PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

In **Mrs. Andrade and Miss Zumbahlen’s Room**, our students are learning the democratic way. We try to honor the rights of all those involved while thinking of the best plan for our classroom. Collaborative planning and cooperation are essential pieces.

Making class decisions that help our room run smoothly is one example. *Savanna* and *Briella* created a way to put away our indoor recess equipment. They even have a check-in system to ensure that everyone does their part.

Anna, one of our former students, designed a method to let everyone know the number of the day (how many days we have been together as a learning community). When *Anna* left several students asked if they could continue the process in her absence (probably in her memory too).

We do not even want to know what we would do without students who care about how their day runs. These were just two examples, but the list really goes on endlessly. The point is that we work together to make our environment an extremely productive one.

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How does our democratic school help extend student thinking in **Vanburgey’s and Mrs. Zahora’s** room? We know you’re wondering, “What is a democratic school?” You’re also probably wondering, “What would I probably see in a democratic school?” One thing you would see is procedures and processes that have been implemented and practiced in order for students to live and work in a school together. In our classroom our students, along with us, reach decisions together that respond to concerns that come up throughout the day. For example, *Chloe* came up to us recently and asked for a class meeting. She expressed her concern about her feelings being hurt. She knew the process for addressing this was to ask us for a family meeting. During our meeting we stressed the importance of each of us not being afraid to use our voices when we need to. After a discussion with our entire group of students *Chloe* felt better and we were proud that she was able to use her voice in a democratic school. Until next time, speak up and use your voice!

INTERMEDIATE CLASSROOMS

In **Mrs. Larison’s Intermediate** classroom, students’ thinking is extended through Central’s democratic processes. For instance, in a democratic school, students are given opportunities to take part in activities that will empower them to become participating members of society. How does that look in the classroom? One way is when the students are able to research topics of their choice for our theme time. Depending on the topic, students often discover information related to civic, national, and global issues.

Elijah and *Cody* are finishing up their research and creating a Power Point presentation on public safety organizations in Middletown. As part of their research, they wrote letters to various public safety departments in Middletown, such as the police and fire departments and the departments of health and law. In their letters, they asked information about types of jobs, duties performed, services provided to the citizens of Middletown, and more. Each of the departments responded and answered all of their questions by writing them a letter back. The Chief of Police even had his letter personally delivered by a patrol officer.

As they read through the responses, *Cody* and *Elijah* began to realize how important these departments are for the safety and comfort of the residents of Middletown. They had not realized how much these departments do for the community. *Cody* remarked that when he grows up, he thinks that it would be fun to be a policeman and also that it would be an important job to have. Both boys came to realize that a city does not function without the help of these departments and the men and women who choose to work in them.

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There are several special characteristics of a democratic school. One of those characteristics is the emphasis placed on students taking responsibility for their own learning. This includes not only the responsibility they take for their day-to-day work and actions, but also their personal reflections on their learning. A place where students can celebrate their growth, as well as reflect on their areas of need is during their student-led family conference.

The students actually lead their conferences, discussing academic and social goals and achievements, as well as areas where they need to show further growth. *Brooke*, in **Muenchenburgey Land**, recently had an incredible conference! She shared with her mother her work samples (portfolio selections), explaining what she had to do for each activity, what she learned from them, and why she selected those pieces. Through these discussions, an extension of her thinking was apparent as she identified misconceptions she had about specific concepts and was then able to explain her new understanding.

Another student who did a super job during his student-led family conference was *Samuel*. As he read the narrative that he had written about his learning, he began editing and revising his writing right there in the middle of the conference! He wanted his narrative to truly reflect his personal best. He did this without any prompting and was glowing at how happy his mom was to see his demonstration of his ability to edit and revise his work, which incidentally was one of his individual learning goals. His mom was so impressed with not only the demonstration of the skills he has been learning, but also with the pride he displayed about himself as a learner.

The piece that is truly amazing about these conferences is that the students do *not* need their teachers there to talk about their learning. Most students are able to independently verbalize their areas of strengths and weaknesses, both academically and socially, while displaying great leadership skills. Student-led family conferences are certainly a strong component of our democratic classroom community.

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Mrs. Thinnes' Intermediate Classroom has several aspects of democratic methods that extend our thinking. One way centers on how we encourage our students to talk in small cooperative learning groups at an appropriate voice level, in order to brainstorm ideas that students may be interested in researching. Students are encouraged to find other students who share their interest in that topic and form a researching team. These teams can have between two to four students participating in the research on a topic.

Austin, S.A., and *Reggie* presented their research through a power point on the Terrorist Attack on Sept. 11th. The students were very surprised by the information that they discovered together. They encouraged

one another to extend their thinking on the topic by asking each other higher thinking questions and finding more research on the topic. Students also included a multimedia video component that helped simulate the events of that day during their presentation. They wanted the audience to feel connected to the research that was presented, and encouraged other students to possibly research more on the topic in an inquiry-based learning environment. This is only one of the ways that students extend their thinking in our classroom on a daily basis.

MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

As Central Academy is a democratic school, many opportunities arise to extend student thinking. When studying topics in **Kristi Joseph's** classes, students analyze issues from multiple perspectives; considering differing points of view extends the students' thinking.

In addition, the students are often involved in problem solving when opportunities or circumstances arise. Always ready to participate in problem solving and use their voice are *Lexi, Emily, Samantha, and Mark*. In addition, **Kristi's** classroom activities are designed to encourage extended thinking. *Alex, Stevie, and Althea* demonstrate and share their extended thinking with their peers.

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Students In **Mrs. Smith's** math classes are currently working on developing strategies for problem solving. The morning math class has been practicing the short answer and extended response questions for the OAA test in April. We use the first 10 – 15 minutes of class each day to warm-up with problems that involve practicing questions and assessing the potential answers. We have practiced scoring answers so that the students will better understand what is necessary to develop a strong answer.

Kaleb has been very intuitive about explaining his approach to questions. The students have been more open to sharing their approaches as we have become better at affirming each student's ideas. Izzi, DeAnna and Brooke as well as Sommer, have become very good at encouraging the quieter students to share in their table groups. I really feel the students are developing more solid approaches to problems and problem solving. I also believe that students are becoming more open to trying things on their own initiative. This support of each other in the democratic process opens new arenas for students.

Other Places and Voices Around Central

During conferences many parents were asking how they could help their children. As the **Literacy Coach**, I would immediately respond:

READ READ READ READ

Read to your child, with your child and listen to reading by your child. Rereading familiar books helps increase fluency which improves comprehension. For beginning readers, echo read together (you read a line, the child repeats the line). Be sure to track the words with your finger. This helps these early readers learn that reading moves left to right across the page. Have a family reading night. Turn off the TV, and everyone reads for 20 to 40 minutes. Older readers can read to younger siblings. Younger readers love to read to the family pet, their favorite stuffed animal or even in front of the mirror. The more your children practice reading with your support, as well as modeling, the better they become! And that reading transfers to successful reading achievement in school.

Happy reading!

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Mr. Perdue has seen many times in which our democratic school has helped extend student thinking. One of the ways was in our sports enrichment program. In this program we decide what we are going to play for the day. We got in a circle and had a discussion of the events that we would like to do. There were a lot of strong opinions. *Travis* and *Grant* as well as several other students shared very freely about what they would like to do. One of the ways we got beyond differences was to vote on the activity we were going to do in our club.

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At Central sometimes I take for granted how well our students use the democratic process to make changes in the events and activities that take place at the school we call home. Last year *Mikala* and *Paige* visited a school where they saw an “alcove” for students to use as a quiet place to study or talk to their friends during lunch. They brought the idea back to Central where they are working with a committee of students to plan how we could make a similar idea work for our middle school.

During our family conferences our middle school students are using a rubric which they collaboratively developed as a middle school to help improve their family conferences. Each student in **Joy Carroll's** advisory has scored himself/herself fairly and sometimes harder than I would have. *Stevie* did an excellent job of scoring herself after her conference, and is already making plans for what she needs to do to improve for the next time. As a teacher and parent here at our school, I want students to be prepared to make decisions for themselves and our community that enrich the world around them. It would be difficult for students if all decisions were made for them at school, telling them how and what to learn, since this would never give the practice at being a contributing citizen.

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From the desk of **Mrs. LeForce, secretary**, I would like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that we have a very important election coming up. On May 4 we urge you to go out to the polls and exercise your right to vote for the school levy being placed on the ballot. This levy combines and substitutes two expiring emergency operating levies and will be a continuing levy with no fixed term and does NOT raise taxes on current properties.

If you are not a registered voter but would like to become one in order to vote on this very important school issue you may pick up a Voter Registration Form from me here in the school office. Please note that the deadline for mailing them back to the Board of Elections is April 5. The form is just a half sheet and the mailing address for sending back to the Board of Elections is listed at the top right corner.