



Teachers, students flex their creative muscles

As teachers and students in District 68 schools returned to in-person learning this year, they rediscovered a host of creative, engaging lessons and units that did not lend themselves to remote learning and had to lay dormant. Those lessons are back now, and this issue will feature one from each school building.

Devonshire School

A couple of times a month, fifth-grade teacher Kitty Llerandi coaches her students through an exercise called a “Mystery Skype.” She works with elementary teachers from other states on a friendly competition in which two classrooms meet online. Students from each class alternate asking yes/no questions, seeking to be the first to figure out in which state the other school is located.

The entire class works as a team. They divide up responsibilities such as doing research, composing questions, tracking answers, mapping the other class’s responses, and more.

Llerandi said the exercise touches on state math standards related to measurement, reasoning and problem-solving, and includes substantial geography content. But it’s more than just a fun way of learning a lesson.

“Students always comment on the

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Questioning: Start broad and narrow down



Devonshire fifth-grade teacher Kitty Llerandi has examples of questions her students have used in the past for the “Mystery Skype” exercise.

amount of collaboration,” she said. “The kids love the independence of it, the creativity of it. They come up with ideas to make it better.”

She added, “My goal is that they run the whole thing. It’s a success if I’m standing against the wall, watching. I coach and facilitate as needed.”

Devonshire Principal Daniel Schuth has high praise for Llerandi and the exercise. “It’s about developing academic characteristics — perseverance, grit, communication, working together in teams. They are some of the most valuable things about what she does,” he said.

Schuth says students learn how to strategize and collaborate. They’re willing to devote the necessary time to doing it well. “It’s not only the Skypes, but there’s a lot of preparation beforehand, and then reflection afterward,” he said. “It gives them a sense of thinking about their thinking.”

Llerandi agreed. “After the Skype we always reflect on our questions. We look at ours, we look at theirs: ‘Do they

make logical sense? What do you think they were doing? What worked well today?’”

Nearly all students find roles that suit them, Llerandi noted. “I have a range of abilities in my class, but there is a point of entry for every student.”

Llerandi has taught in the district since 2008, and has been doing the exercise since she came to fifth grade five years ago. She plans to retire after next year, and is working with a few teaching colleagues to keep the exercise alive. “I see it as a breath of life. It’s vital, I think. The kids become so active.”

Jane Stenson School

Fourth graders get a close-up look at entrepreneurship in the four-week Business Creation unit, done in cooperation with second grade.

At Stenson, fourth-grade teacher Molly Rose Kilgore said the unit began as a way to address state standards related to learning economics. Each year, her class creates a product, plans

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Creative muscles

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production, budgeting and marketing, and “sells” it to a visiting second-grade class. She works with LMC director Molly Layman on the unit. Products have included “smencils” (pencils with a pleasing fragrance), pencil toppers, a Plinko game, bracelets, bookmarks, and “fidget” toys, among others.

“The students love it,” Kilgore said. “They make the products — totally their own ideas. They really get into setting the price, making the budget, creating the advertising.”

“The energy in the classrooms on the day of the culminating activity is positive and high,” said Stenson Principal Robyn Huemmer. “The students benefit because they have to



A Jane Stenson fourth grader makes his products available on the day of the big sale.

actually market and sell their goods. Students realize pretty quickly if they have a product that is successful or if they need to rethink their product.”

Students bring a collaborative spirit to the exercise. “It’s a lot of teamwork,” Kilgore said. “The whole group has to agree on the idea — they can only sell one product. They have to agree on how to divide the work. Kids have to understand

what they do well and split up responsibilities.”

She added that the unit provides a welcome change of pace for students. “They like anything that’s hands-on, anything that’s different from the day-to-day routine,” she said. “They’re super proud of their products.”

Highland School

Highland fourth and fifth graders got into the Olympic spirit this winter with an activity that mimicked the worldwide multisport extravaganza that went on in China.

The students engaged in a series of events called the “Mini-Metric Olympics” that allowed them to reinforce math skills, particularly estimation and measurement. They also submitted ideas for an Olympic mascot and team flags, which were displayed in classrooms and hallways. They even conducted opening ceremonies.

Events included the “Left-Handed Sponge Squeeze,” “Cotton Ball Shot Put,” “Right-Handed Marble Grab,” “Paper Straw Javelin Throw” and “Paper Plate Discus.” Participants formed teams and first did the activity, then estimated the outcome, before measuring to see how close their estimates were.

“It offered something a little bit different from regular classes,” said Jennie Greene, AIM (Advancing Inquiry and Meaning) teacher at Highland. “It addressed the measurement standards, but we also worked on teambuilding and student buy-in.”

“Participants showed creativity and collaboration in deciding team names and designing their flags,” said Highland Principal Karen Bradley.

The exercise provided multiple opportunities for learning and reflection, Greene said. “It was interesting how many kids submitted mascot drawings. We discussed symbols, mascots, and what they mean.” For the flags, she said, “We did some research on what the Olympic flag means, what the U.S. flag means.”

Greene agreed that students enjoyed the tasks. “They were really focused,” she said. “They were nice to each other, not so focused on who won. They were eager to try each event, work with rulers and units of measure. All measures used the metric system, which was part of the point.”

Old Orchard Junior High School

Junior high schoolers are learning to think more critically about the media that pervade modern life in a new class introduced this year.

Called “Media Literacy,” the class is intended to make students more aware of the messages they see and hear. Principal Greg Hanson recruited Brett Morrow, an eighth-grade ELA teacher, to design and teach the trimester-long class, which is offered to all Old Orchard students.

Morrow said the class uses a broad definition of “media”—

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. All are invited to attend.

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Highland fourth graders Carter Cleveland-Lax, Sofia Pascual and Kirim Djurovic display their flag and Olympic torch.

ranging from conventional forms such as television, movies and advertising through social media channels such as Instagram and TikTok, and even extending to gaming platforms such as Twitch. “The purpose is to deepen and expand their understanding of what media is, and what literacy is,” Morrow said. “Once they understand that they’re seeing media everywhere and being influenced by it, they’re understanding it better. It’s aimed at their own experience right now.”

Morrow said someone who is “media literate” can access, analyze, critically evaluate, create and take action within any medium. Those are increasingly important skills, according to OOJH Principal Greg Hanson: “The lives of kids in junior high are increasingly becoming formed and affected by social media. I’ve definitely seen a spike in the drama and the conflict coming out of what’s on Snapchat and TikTok.”

The class also covers research into how people think. “I’m trying to expose them to their own psychology and how the human brain works,” Morrow said. “We talk about confirmation bias a lot, for example.”

There’s discussion about issues such as how messages influence behavior, and how algorithms are used to direct messages to individuals based on their online activity.

As a parent of an eighth grader, Morrow appreciates the importance of the class. He said other parents do, too: “In parent-teacher conferences, the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive.”

Morrow is working to create a three-year sequence in the future. While all students are getting the same content this year, students in seventh and eighth grades will build on their introductory experience in subsequent years.

Hanson said he expects the class to align with college and career goals, preparing students for classes in areas such as broadcasting, coding and design, and theater in high school and beyond. The current classroom has space to add technology, he said, and school officials are considering what would fit best with classes at Niles North High School.

District notes

Earlier this year, Old Orchard Junior High eighth grader Elizabeth Ramirez was honored by the Illinois State Board of Education and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield.

The two organizations sponsored a student art contest under the title, “Survival Through Self Expression.”

Elizabeth’s entry (*shown at right*) was chosen as “Best in Show, and also was the winner in the grades-68 division.



Her entry was used on a poster sent to all schools during Illinois Arts Education Week, March 14-18. She was also recognized at an ISBE board meeting.

As part of her entry, Elizabeth wrote: “When composing the ideas for my art piece, I first thought of what did survival of self-expression mean to me. The first image in my mind was how in this pandemic, many people coped and survived through their own self-expression. The gray tones used for the woman in the drawing set the mood of how I felt and how many felt during part of the pandemic. The striking red gladiolus flowers growing beneath the woman’s hand/arm symbolizes strength that was hidden but is now growing and beginning to show. The yellow and orange marigold flower represents a light within a person, with the colors meaning positive energy and optimism. That optimism is what many people found in self-expression and that would be in different emotions of yourself shown in many forms.”

* * *

Old Orchard’s eighth-grade boys’ basketball team won the “Little Nine” end-of-season basketball playoffs in March. The second-seeded team defeated top seed Lincoln Hall School of Lincolnwood.

“The boys had a great time competing against a talented Lincoln Hall team who beat us during our last match-up in the regular season,” said Diego Marin, who teaches eighth-grade math and coaches the team, along with science teacher Courtney Keenan. “The energy in the gym was nothing like you would expect from an 8th-grade basketball game. The boys really had a great night playing in the main gym in front of the many fans that came out to support them.”

The Little Nine includes all middle schools and junior highs in Niles Township.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear School District 68
Community,

Until recently I had planned to dedicate my part of this *Highlights* to the culmination of an extraordinarily difficult year as we returned to in-person schooling and have begun addressing the hardships created by the pandemic. Our staff, our parents, and most importantly, our students have been through so much that it is at times hard to have the bandwidth to deal with much else... but I have to digress on that topic and address another pressing issue that has the greatest of implications for the well-being of our local community and beyond.

The Skokie community is home to people from all parts of the world and who represent all of the world's major religions. That is a fact that makes Skokie a remarkable community and is something that has been celebrated by our school district and by the Village of Skokie, particularly in recent years.

Over the last few weeks we have witnessed new and horrific examples of racially motivated mass killings of innocent people because of their skin color and the abhorrent belief that they do not belong in this country, or on this earth. You all know where this comes from... blatant and outright racism in its most evil form. This is against the American values that I was raised to believe were part of the foundation of a righteous, fair, and benevolent nation, the land of the free and home of the brave. It's hard to

reconcile those values with what I see today. In my heart I know there is another system of values that has always existed, and the events of recent years are just another atrocious example. For much of my life, being a white male has made it easier for me to not see that racism exists to the extent that it does because I have not been the most obvious victim of racism. That is not a luxury that our "non-white" brothers and sisters get to experience. For them, as well as for members of many religious groups, discrimination and racism are a daily part of their existence.

If you are religious, I ask that you examine your faith to guide your approach to others. No God that I am aware of condones the slaughter of innocents because of their differences. If you are not religious, then I ask that you examine the values of human dignity and examine how you would wish to be treated if you were the "other."

Some people see any finding of fault in our culture as unpatriotic and I beg to differ. The fact that we can look inward and aspire to a greater set of ideals than the current reality makes us patriotic Americans who want something better for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors.

This is a place of wonder but that sense of refuge is imperiled by the movements that are taking place in this country and I would like to call upon everyone to create the bandwidth to confront hatred and intolerance at every opportunity that presents itself.

Hate still has no home in District 68 schools and District 68 still welcomes everyone!

Sincerely,
James E. Garwood, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.