

This Week at Central Academy

October 12, 2009

The past two weeks have been busy here at Central Academy. We've had two groups of students from Miami University, Oxford campus. On Friday, September 25, seventy-five students arrived in four different shifts throughout the day to talk with us about our school's structure and instructional strategies, and to observe in our classrooms. On the following Friday, October 2, another group of 33 students came for the afternoon. Our visitors met with me when they first arrived, and then quietly observed in various classrooms throughout the school.

They also wanted to talk with teachers and me about our work with learning. The Miami students and their professors were specifically interested in our reading and writing workshops, as well as in our integrated curriculum and extended learning blocks at the middle school level. We always find that our students enjoy sharing their work with others, so I frequently ask if students who are caught up on their own work would like to meet briefly with guests. Visitors are consistently impressed with the degree to which our students readily and confidently communicate how our school works, our underlying philosophy, and the reasons behind our school and classroom structures.

Last Friday, *Aryonna*, *Izzy*, *Angel F*, and *Jacob H* all volunteered to talk with our visitors after their classroom observations. In response to questions posed by the professors and Miami students, *Jacob H* shared that we believe we are all learners here at Central. He described our Middle School Retreat that we had held in August, and explained how several of the teachers and I had given students permission to call us by our first names. While this is not unusual in schools like Central, the impressive part was the degree to which Jacob explained why we could do this. "We're all learners together," Jacob explained. "Our teachers will know things that we don't know, and they will teach us those things; but as we work on our quests or our science labs, we might find out things together that our teachers didn't know. So we can call each other by our first names because that shows that we're all learners together." (Interestingly, out of habit, the students all continue to call us by last names. But having them understand the mutual learning from each other is an important part of our work together.)

Ayreonna explained that at Central everyone is expected to speak what is on our minds and hearts. "We learn how to discuss things and even to disagree about things with respect. The respect is important. But it's also important to find your voice and speak up," she explained. *Izzie* agreed, and explained how each Advisory in middle school is responsible to research what university they will visit each year. "We all have to agree on it," she explained. "So we have to spend time talking about why we think our choice is important. ... And the trips are a lot of fun!" she shared.

The professors and students were all impressed with the work they saw in the classrooms, with the degree to which our students were engaged with their work, and most especially, with the degree to which our students were comfortable in talking with visitors about their work and our school.

I hope you'll take a minute to read through the various classroom articles, as the teachers share specific ways in which our students have used their sense of voice in the past two weeks to deepen their learning.

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

Oct. 13	TEAM Bd. Mtg. – 6:30
Oct. 14	Early Release
Oct. 15	Skating Party – 6:30-8:30
Oct. 21	Early Release
Oct. 22	Family Math Night-5:30-7:00
Oct 24	Middle School Bon Fire 7-9:00

EARLY PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

Earlier this year, Dr. James Beane visited our building and **Mrs. Jantausch's Early Primary** classroom. He helped us begin asking questions about the world. During one activity, we split up into groups and took a walk around the building. Many students came up with questions about things they noticed in nature. *Elijah* wondered, "Why do the leaves fall off the trees?" *Conner* was also interested in the leaves, *Will* wondered what was in the woods, and *Taylor* was interested in why flowers fall off of their stems. Many of the students' questions centered on nature and life outdoors.

With the transition of summer to fall, it seemed a perfect time to incorporate these student questions into our learning. When students have a role in deciding what they study, they often extend their thinking and develop deeper understanding of the content.

We have begun our investigation with trees and their leaves. We have learned about nonfiction books, and how they are used to provide information. By reading our nonfiction, we have discovered that trees provide many important items we use each day – including oxygen. Boy, were we amazed to find out that trees make their own food and even "breathe" to give us oxygen! We still haven't quite unearthed the answers to all of our questions, but we are continuing our journey. In fact, the information we have found has led us to ask even *more* questions!

It is important to extend our student's thinking by using student-based learning. Student-based learning allows the students to be more engaged in their learning especially if the content is centered on what interests them. In **Miss Miller's Early Primary Class** we have used student-based learning throughout our day. One time of day that the students really get to decide how they want to extend their thinking is during our CGI problems. The students are able to use several different objects of their choice to solve their CGI problem. *Isabella* has been using unifix cubes to help her solve her problems this week, while *LaNiya* used red and yellow chips to help her solve her problems. Each student chose which object would help their understanding the best.

During Math Workshop the students also get to decide which activity they would like to do first to extend their thinking. Last week, *Eli* decided to go to the Staircases activity to further his understanding of number order. *Gavin* also made a big decision on what to do and decided to do a Mystery Box, which is counting how many objects are in the Mystery Box. Over the past few weeks, I have noticed that the students really enjoy deciding where they will be going for Math Workshop and what objects they will be using to solve their CGI problems.

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Ms. Roe and Miss Smith's Early Primary class began Theme Work this week. We started by brainstorming what "Counting on Us" meant to us. Here are a few of their responses. *Mark* said that it meant counting things like we do in Math Workshop. *Jordan* shared that it meant making good choices. *Chloe* felt that helping people was a way that we could show that we could be counted on. A few other students said it meant respecting people, making people happy and being responsible. We then categorized our list of topics to decide what the majority of our responses were centered around.

Next we wrote "I wonder" questions around our brainstorming list. *Emma S.* wondered what responsible meant. *Katie* wondered, "What makes people happy?" I took it a step further asking the students if the same things make people happy. *Katie* also wanted to know what trust meant. What great questions!

The following day, the students chose books on their level, that they hope will help them answer some of our class "I wonder" questions. The students have the opportunity to read and research individually, as pairs or in a small group. Each Friday, we meet together as a class at the end of our Reading comprehension/Theme work time to update our "I wonder" chart. We answer some of our questions, as well as add some more questions that we have had after reading our books throughout the week.

This Friday, *Eristan* shared that in her book, *Playground Fun*, the character was happy because she was able to go to the park and play on the playground with her family. I asked if everyone in our class liked going to the playground with their family. Some responded that they didn't. This answered our question about whether the same things make people happy. *Shawvontae* shared that in his book, *I'm a Fire Fighter*, people count on fire fighters to put out fires with their water hoses.

We hope you will look forward to reading what we've continued to learn through our research in our next TWAC article.

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Mrs. Uhl & Ms. Stillwell's Early Primary Class has been really diving into their learning this year! By using the student's input, we can investigate topics that are engaging for them.

A couple of weeks ago, the class brainstormed some topics they wanted to know more about. The class had an overwhelming interest in learning more about space. This week I have been reading books about the moon and the planets and we recorded some of the things we noticed. *Jordan* extended his thinking by noticing from the pictures in the book that the sun is much bigger than all of the planets. In addition, he learned that the moon is as hot as boiling water during the daytime! *Charlie* learned that the moon is always moving and is going around the Earth all the time.

In addition to reading about space, we have been working on extending our thinking by reading Just Right Books and responding to our reading. This past week, I had several baskets of Just Right Books. The student's got an opportunity to choose a book that looked interesting to them from their Just Right Book Basket. Then, they worked on reading their book each day and thinking about what they were reading as they read. First, they had to find all the snap words in their book. Second, they had to write and draw what

happened in the beginning, middle and end of their story. Then, they had to tell about their favorite part of the story and why. Next, they had to describe a connection they had to the story. Lastly, they had to write what they still wondered about their story.

Ariel extended her thinking to the story, *Fun, Fun, Fun* because she read about a horse and realized she had a connection about horses. She loves horses and knows a lot about them! *Gabe* was able to write about his favorite part because he noticed that his book, *Looking For Birds*, talked about blue birds, which is one of his favorite color of birds!

Madelyn extended her thinking by writing about the beginning, middle and end of her story, *Cupcakes*. In the beginning, Pig wanted to make cupcakes for Bear. In the middle, Pig decided to make the cupcakes in the bathtub; and in the end, Bear arrives and Pig and Bear eat the cupcakes. *Ahvonni* extended her thinking by recognizing that several words in her book were snap words that we had learned. She found 15 snap words in her book! She counted “the” eight times and “are” seven times. I am so proud to see how well the student’s have been extending their thinking. They have continued to grow as readers, writers and mathematicians! I look forward to seeing their continued progress.

LATE PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

In Mrs. Andrade and Miss Zumbahlen’s Room, research is the vehicle through which student-based learning extends our students’ thinking. Everyone knows that our class is knee deep in the planet Mars right now. What you may not know is that the teachers do not make all of the decisions in this room. As reflected in our last TWAC, there is a lot of student choice that goes into project-based learning.

All it takes is a high interest topic to elevate our students’ desire to learn. Finding the right resources and understanding how to answer inquiries is vital to starting the process. Then, the students begin to apply their knowledge across the curriculum. explaining their findings to their peers is probably the most important part because they learn best from one another. All of these skills form a mighty force to help the students synthesize their projects. At last, the final presentations can be used as an evaluation tool of the students’ learning.

The best part is that there’s no value that can be placed on the amount of learning that has just transpired. We’re talking rich vocabulary, building background knowledge, and the ability to work in a group as just some of the worthwhile attributes. Trusting the students to guide our path could be considered the scariest part. But think about it. If someone had let you dive into studies that motivated you, wouldn’t you have been more engaged?

Well, the proof is in the pudding. As promised, we presented our Mars/Space findings to the entire school at the first Celebration of Learning in October. *Rowan and Allison*, two olders, in our room led the entire presentation. I have to say that there wasn’t one argument about whether or not to present from anyone. At the beginning, there were more important questions like what and how. In the end, everyone was ready and raring to go. Practicing and watching the children improve their presentation skills over time was probably our biggest delight (as teachers). JOB WELL DONE!

In our school we were so lucky to have James Beane come visit. He believes students learn better when they are able to shape their own learning. In Mrs. Amburgey and Mrs. Van Ostrand's (a.k.a. VanBurgey's) room, along with Miss Qua and Mrs. Zahora, we were even luckier because Dr. Beane spent two days with us. Dr. Beane thought our students were WOW!!

One approach our class has taken towards student-based learning has been through the students' love of science and learning about insects. Oh the questions they have! Some of their wonderings were "How long does a butterfly live?" "Is their blood different colors than ours?" and "Can insects get concussions when they crash into something?"

We had many students that were so thrilled about their learning that they went above and beyond to continue their research at home. *Braden* was so excited about his work on grasshoppers, that he went home and did a completely different report on crickets. *Kylie* took it upon herself to find a book about butterflies at home and brought it in to school to further everyone's learning. *Alyssa* also wanted to learn about butterflies and used the internet at home to research how butterflies get their beautiful coloring. There are several students who want to continue their learning about these wonderful insects and are preparing a readers theater all about insects for an upcoming Celebration of Learning.

Keep questioning your children – they will have a lot to tell you! Until next time, GO INSECTS and CENTRAL!

INTERMEDIATE CLASSROOMS

Researching topics of interest and developing a way to showcase the newfound knowledge is one way that learning at Central is student-based. In other words, students play an active role in determining what they learn, especially when it comes to theme projects, which are related to our school-wide theme. Students in Mrs. Larison's Intermediate classroom have had a bit of difficulty negotiating this trimester's theme, *Counting on Us* (How Do I Count?). To help students think more deeply about the theme, the students discussed ways that people, individually and as members of organizations, make a difference in the world. They listened to their classmates' ideas and brainstormed research topics together.

Valkyrie had some initial difficulty trying to decide on a topic to research for this first school-wide theme. Although initially frustrated, she didn't give up. She kept thinking about the topic, asked questions, and listened to responses. She finally decided that her research project would be about how she counts on herself. She began by writing down times in her life when she has done good deeds that in some way make a difference. Later, she decided she wanted to include stories about how other people count and make a difference in the world. She designed a survey to gather data for her research. Because she is dedicated to exploring her topic, her initial idea has grown into something bigger than she had originally planned. She is extending her thinking to explore additional pathways and is more passionate about her research topic than any topic that I could have assigned for her to research.

Student-based learning naturally increases student engagement; therefore, we are big fans of it in Muenchenburgey Land! One area where student-based learning occurs in our room is when the students select theme-based research topics. Through researching, the students are working on many of the Ohio State Indicators, as they are naturally embedded within this process. This means the students' curricular needs are being addressed through learning about something that is important to them.

For example, *Lindsey* selected Ruby Bridges as her theme topic after hearing a story read aloud in class. She was able to connect this topic to our theme, *Counting on Us*, by identifying the impact Ruby had on the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the impact Ruby still has today. Through her research, *Lindsey* has extended her thinking to include all the people who Ruby actually counted on during this time period, including her teacher, her parents, the Supreme Court, the police, and the many people who supported her. Before her research began, *Lindsey* was focused more on how others counted on Ruby. *Lindsey* realized that in order for our country to count on Ruby, Ruby had to count on others. *Lindsey*'s passion for understanding more about Ruby Bridges has resulted in her thinking more in depth about the Civil Rights Movement and all the people who played a role in it, especially those who we rarely hear about.

Writer's Workshop is another time of our day when student-based learning is in full force. Students are allowed to take their own writing idea and develop, through the writing process, a published piece of work. This is a highly engaging time of the day because we are teaching the writing curriculum through the students' ideas! During Writer's Workshop, many students choose to write about personal experiences they have had. *Liam* has been working on his individual writing goals through his personal narratives, *How I Busted My Chin* and *The Great Wolf Lodge*. *Nya* also wrote a story called *The Great Wolf Lodge*, as well as a story called *Riding My Bike*. *Sean* really focused on descriptive writing through his story, *Riding the Diamond Back*. During Writer's Workshop, the students' ideas become the vehicle through which we deliver the curriculum!

Anytime the students' ideas can drive the curriculum, the engagement automatically increases, and the students begin thinking more in depth about what they are learning, as it has meaning and relevance for them!

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Ms. Thinner's Intermediate Classroom is filled with student learning opportunities that help extend student learning. Students during Theme Time are researching several topics that the students are interested in on a daily basis. Some of these topics include animal rights, animal abuse, and diseases such as cancer. Since, the students have chosen these topics they are more successful in creating projects that extend their thinking. Some of these projects include creating power points, diaramas, writing big books and flip charts. *Yulia* and *Bri* are working on a big book on their research choice of animal abuse and how people can help this cause. *Noasia*, *Alyssa*, *Jazmyne*, and *Alexis* are working on researching their topic on cancer and extending their thinking by thinking of creative ways that they could make a difference in a cancer patient's life. One example of their ideas would be participating in the cancer walk in Cincinnati.

Students also extend their thinking through student learning and choice during (Silent Sustained Reading) SSR. Students have the opportunity to read books that they have selected from the school library and the books in the book bin from our classroom library. They read these books for thirty min. after a daily Teacher Read Aloud. Students are permitted to move where they feel like they would learn best during silent reading. During this time, students also have a weekly conference with me where higher thinking questions are asked to extend their thinking about the book. The higher thinking questions include: what do you predict would happen if you wrote another chapter to the book? (analysis ques.) and what connection to the book can you make with your life? (application ques.)

As part of an after-read activity students are then asked to summarize what they read in their Reading Response Journal, and to make two-three connections between the student's life and the text. The two students share their books with the class in our Share Chair. Students then ask each other questions to extend their thinking in another way about what they have read. So, there are plenty of positive student learning activities to extend student learning in Ms. Thinner's Intermediate Classroom.

MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Student responsibility and activities are the roots of student-centered learning. Student responsibility and independence help develop motivation, self-evaluation, time management, and the skills needed to access information. Research that focuses on student learning shows that focus on what learners do, and why they think they are doing it is more important than what the teacher does. At Central, we focus on student centered learning.

In **Mrs. Hodson's** Humanities, students are working on their Renaissance projects. *Brett* and *Jordan* are researching castles. They are focusing on the differences between medieval and renaissance castles and the changes that they made. They want to find out why the changes happened. *Mikala* is focusing on Leonardo DaVinci. She is researching the controversies that surround his paintings. Students are more involved and challenged when they are working on projects in which they have selected their own topic to research.

When learning is based on student interests and needs, the students are more engaged and involved in the learning process. As they are more involved in the learning, the content and activities are often exceptionally challenging – providing students opportunities to extend their thinking. Students are highly motivated to work with significantly difficult content, and they implement higher order thinking skills to accomplish the tasks at hand. *Miles*, *Caleb*, and *Sam* from **Kristi Joseph's Humanities** class consistently select challenging areas of interest and produce exemplary work based on this content. In **Kristi's** math class, *Rachel*, *Leta*, *Quinn*, and *Austin* also have demonstrated evidence of extended thinking during independent math time.

Student voice in learning is very important. It is the moving force for Central Academy and is what makes our family special. Research and observation on my part, has shown that when students are engaged in what they are learning, and that the product is deeper and richer beyond the standards that our society expects. Just imagine working at a job that you love and cannot wait to get to every morning. Would that not be an absolute joy?! We believe that the same is true for the students of our building.

The students in **Mrs. Smith's** classes are currently studying the effects of our use of “stuff” and how that impacts the environment. They are looking at the cycle of stuff from resources to manufacturing to marketing to use to trash. There are many opinions floating around my room and ideas for solutions. *DeAnna* feels that we are being selfish and polluting our planet. She suggests that we use our resources respectfully and limit our consumption. *Bailey* feels that we do too much unnecessary driving. She suggests practical ideas like wearing a sweater instead of turning up the heat; using a clothesline instead of the dryer in good weather, and buying used things instead of new. *Austin* suggests that we shop Green. It may cost a bit more now, but he feels that it will help all of us in the long run. *Asia* has taken the focus of the disposal of our trash. She is suggesting that we look at the things we are disposing, and then look at other solutions.

Can we recycle more? What can we do to stop the incineration that continues to pollute our air with poisonous dioxins? The essays that the students are producing are very thoughtful and also thought

provoking. I am glad that this is our future. They are learning to use their voices and speaking to issues that concern us all. You should be very proud.

Other Places and Voices Around Central

Moments from the **Math Coach, Mrs. Brubaker**: Student-based inquiry is a great match for our new Investigations math curriculum. Currently, the students in Intermediate are creating their own survey questions, deciding what two group's data they would like to compare. Then they are figuring out how to collect their data, represent it, and analyze it. The students are asking each other whether they have a reasonable question that will yield a numeric response, whether their two groups will make a good comparison. All throughout the project students are questioning and discussing their work to create the best information and analysis possible. Students are beginning to feel comfortable asking questions and debating their peers thinking and ideas. When this occurs the student's thinking is being extended. Also, throughout this project, we are guiding students to deepen their understanding of data collection and analysis by asking them to create their own knowledge, analyzing the results. They have to compare two sets of data and come to conclusions based on the data they collected. The students can then use these skills in on their own James Bean-related research, which will help them delve deeper into their topic or subject.

Mrs. Carroll, Mr. Perdue and Mr. Gaston went with the middle school to the Ohio Renaissance Festival on October 1, 2009. *Bailey* asked **Roger** if he would help her find information on working at the Renaissance Festival because he has a friend that works in one of the shops at the festival. He informed Roger that she can apply next May on their website. She has deepened her interest in the Renaissance period through her studies in Humanities and her quest work. *Bailey* is really looking forward to being a part of the Renaissance Festival.

Mrs. Carroll was working in **Ms. Roe's** classroom with the students during math. *Katie* has tried every day this week to use new strategies while solving her math problems while *Rowyn* asked to see the previous day's chart to learn from other student's strategies. Way to go girls! You're stretching your math skills and strategies.

Students are extending their thinking in many ways during **Mrs. Hick's Music Class** time. In Early Primary and Late Primary classes, students are experimenting with singing and playing songs at varying tempos (speeds). They are learning that any song can be played or sung at any tempo, but most songs have some approximate speed at which they sound best. The extended thinking comes into play when students have to decide WHY a particular song does or does not sound good at a given speed. This has opened many interesting discussions about musical style. For instance, younger students have realized that singing a lullaby at a very fast tempo isn't really sleep-inducing!

In the Intermediate and Middle School classes, individual students often get to choose the tempo that the class will then play or sing a given piece or perform movement associated with a given activity. Students have to then extend their thinking (and counting!) to fit all rhythmic patterns in a given song to the established tempo. The students are often quite creative at what they will ask the rest of their classmates

to be able to do! In case any adult on the planet did not know this, most students prefer challenging their classmates to perform at a fast tempo rather than a slow one. Surprise, surprise!

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I think that when students have a choice in what they learn their interests leads them to places that might not have ever emerged. They come up with questions that the teacher wouldn't have thought of otherwise. The excitement that the students show when they have a choice in what they learn drives everything. Their research into a topic of their choice with a guiding question just leads them to have other questions; and with their excitement they just want to figure out the answers to all of them. I think that it is a really fantastic way for students to learn. This makes learning fun!

In **Mrs. Beatty's art** room, we look at different artists and I ask the students questions about the type of art and how they think the artist makes the piece. Then I read a book about the artist to answer some of their questions. Some of the things that the students come up with and the connections they make amaze me.