



Birchwood Clipboard

The Lion's Roar

MAR 2010 Volume 16,6

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Special Program Highlights

February has been an exciting month!

- Our MathCounts team took first place in the NE Ohio Engineers chapter competition at Cleveland State. First place! Five Birchwood students placed in the top 12 of this difficult contest in which they were pitted against 150 of the brightest math students in the area. Hawken School was 2nd and Incarnate Word was third. See inside story for the student names and more details.
- Results are just in on the regional Scholastic Writing Competition. In the region at large out of over 165,000 entries they chose 1,100 Gold Key entries. In our 7th and 8th grade Birchwood has 11 Gold Key winners! They will move on to national level judging and these results come out at the end of March. Student names with their piece titles can be found on the 2nd floor bulletin board and also in the article in this issue.
- Real science was on display at The 5th and 6th Grade Science Fair. Students practiced presenting their projects to a number of parents and friends on Science Fair Morning, February 25, 2010. Later they were interviewed by Mrs. Tzeng's seventh grade LA students. Finally, they had a chance to present them to the Birchwood Community during Science Night. See inside articles for the subject of each student's investigation and for the exciting science projects going on in the other grades this month too.
- **Dhweeja D** will take her project to the Western Reserve District 5 Science Day at Akron University on Saturday, March 20. A group of other students in grades 4, 5, and 6 will attend the Science Olympiads that day.
- It has come to our attention that **Mr. Debelak's** article on the benefits of academic competitions has been published in the online Encyclopedia Britannica. This article was originally published in *Gifted Child Today* in the Spring and Summer issues of 2008. A summary and an excerpt of this article may be read at: <http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/32739727/Academic-Competitions>.
- The first and second graders have been busy with their stories for WVIZ's Reading Rainbow story writing contest.
- Be sure you tack the March calendar on your refrigerator – a lot is in store!



Class News

K-Computer

Kindergartners have started coming to computer class. They are learning a program called MicroWorlds Jr. They are exploring how to draw pictures with the paint tools and how to give the turtle instructions to move around the screen.

K-Math Center

- The students continue with the Wood Math program and the Singapore program
- They all learned addition, with regrouping
- Some of the children are working on 2 digits subtraction with regrouping
- The group learned the concept of fractions in $1/2$, $1/4$, and $1/8$
- Congratulations to **Joshua S, Gyovanni M, and Praveen K** for your enthusiastic working on Math
- And congratulations to **Alex W** for all the hard work to progress in Math

K-Reading Center

- During instructional reading time the Advance group is working on the chapter book *Dinosaurs Before Dark*
- Students do individual and group reading and work on book reports
- Congratulations to **Marissa B, Saleh D, and Nurah N** for progress in reading

K-Language Arts/Writing Center

- They write sentences using the sight words of the week
- They also work on neatness
- The students write daily through varied activities
- Congratulations to **Bridget L** for your writing

K-Social Studies

Presidents in the past and present:

- George Washington and the Cherry Tree
- Thomas Jefferson: author of the Declaration of Independence
- Abraham Lincoln: humble origins, "Honest Abe"
- Current United States President

American Symbols and Figures:

- American flag (and Pledge of Allegiance)
- Statue of Liberty
- Mount Rushmore
- The White House (and Presidential Seal)

American Holidays and Ideas of Democracy and Slavery:

- July 4th, "Independence Day" – the "birthday" of our nation.
- Democracy (rule of people) – Americans wanted to rule themselves, Instead of being ruled by a faraway king
- Slavery in early America

Thank you, **Mr. Samulak** and **Mrs. Landrum**, for a wonderful celebration of the 100 Days at School.

1st-2nd Computer

We have begun to learn MicroWorlds 2.0. This level of MicroWorlds is more advanced. The students use words to give the turtle instructions instead of clicking a button. It is more challenging than what we used earlier in the year but the turtle can also do more things. The students are very excited to learn more about programming.

1st-2nd Language Arts

This month we went to the Breen Center for the Performing Arts at St. Ignatius High School to see the Dancing Wheels Company's performance of "The Snowman". Dancing Wheels is a Cleveland-based professional dance company that integrates handicapped and non-handicapped dancers. Mary Verdi-Fletcher, the first American wheelchair dancer and founder of the company, co-starred in this beautiful adaptation of Raymond Briggs's book. After viewing the wordless book and a video production of it in class, the children enjoyed seeing it come to life in a lively and entertaining display of the talents of the dancers.

1st Math

The first graders wrapped up their unit on geometric shapes and are now in the midst of exploring different units of measurement. We began the unit comparing the customary units of length (inches, feet, yards) and deciding which units would be the best for measuring various items. Next, we moved on to reading a thermometer and discussed which types of clothing would be best at different temperatures. Now we are exploring the measurement of volume and finding that liquids that we encounter every day come in different sized containers and are measured differently, according to how much the containers hold. We will conclude the unit with some lessons on weight.



2nd Math

The “blue” math group is right in the middle of a unit on geometry. With geometry, the challenge is in learning the appropriate vocabulary, since new words are often applied to old ideas. For example, in kindergarten, the children learned to identify a triangle. But in second grade they are learning that not all triangles are created equally. In geometry, we distinguish between acute, right, and obtuse triangles. Then, to these terms are added isosceles, scalene, and equilateral. All this can be quite confusing. However, the children were able to pick it up, with practice, and are making big strides.

The “purple group” is now working with fractions and mixed numbers, learning to add and subtract, multiply and divide. This can be a difficult concept and requires the ability to find common denominators as well as reduce fractions. I am quite proud of their progress.

1st-2nd Reading

The first and second graders have started the Junior Great Books program. They are reading great literature and are learning to apply critical thinking skills while writing about and discussing the stories. The first graders have enjoyed reading *The Pied Piper*, *The Mermaid Who Lost Her Comb*, and animal fiction poems. The second graders have read *The Happy Lion*, *Squirrel Nutkin*, and a selection from the writings of A. A. Milne.

1st-2nd Science

The first and second graders just completed their habitat studies. As a culminating project, each student created a diorama about a type of habitat such as ocean, rainforest, river, desert, arctic, etc. The diorama projects were done at home, and they all turned out really neat! Thanks to all the family members who helped turn our classroom into a magical world of various habitats.

The students are excited to begin learning all about health and the human body, which is our next topic of study. We'll begin by reviewing the five senses; we'll play sound, taste, touch, and smell guessing games to see how well our senses work. Plus, we'll see how our eyes can sometimes play tricks on us with optical illusions. Before moving on to healthy eating and living habits, the first and second graders will also study some of the major organs and systems in our bodies and create a Body Basics Book as they learn. We're excited to welcome a few parents into the classroom, too, as guest speakers.

In February, we visited the Bay Village Nature Center. The students really enjoyed seeing and classifying the many animals there. During the first week of March, we'll be going on the History of Maple Sugaring tour offered at the park. We'll walk along the Sugarbrush Trail to see the sap-collecting methods and syrup-making processes used by Native Americans, pioneers and modern sugar farmers. We may even get to taste at the end!

1st-2nd Social Studies

The first and second graders completed a unit on national holidays, monuments, songs and symbols. As a conclusion to their study of famous landmarks in Washington D.C., the students made simple models of their favorite site. They also used books in the classroom to find facts about these places.

1st Spanish

The first graders worked on food group, memorized vocabulary, and completed exercises in the Spanish book. They used flashcards and played games about the new vocabulary. They are learning the Spanish dance “Malagueña” to present it in the Spanish program.

2nd Spanish

The second graders worked on parts of the calendar including days of the week and months of the year. They completed exercises in the activity book. They are learning the Spanish dance “Malagueña” to present it in the Spanish program.

3rd-4th Computer

We have been learning to type using Type to Learn. It is hard work but it is a great skill to have. The students are excited to move on and gain speed and accuracy in their typing. We have also been working on advancing our programming skills in MicroWorlds 2.0.

3rd-5th Language Arts

One final word on the fall *Cricket* contest: Fourth grader **Amir I** appeared in class one day with an Honorable Mention award for his story entitled *Invisaboy*. Thank goodness he eventually realized it was a writing award and not junk mail! Due to the efforts of **Jim Sukys** to trumpet Birchwood's prize-winning sweep, the *Plain Dealer* published the winning students' names and the top three finishers' photographs. Several local newspapers also reported on the students' success.



The third and fourth grade students have embarked on an ambitious writing project—an illustrated autobiography that they will display at the spring Open House and perhaps keep to show to their own children. In addition to our regular story modeling, the fifth graders have been enjoying the writing of creative stories based on seventh grade Power of the Pen prompts. It's never too early to begin training our next competitive team!

3rd Math

We completed our unit on geometry and are now beginning to work with fractions. This is quite a challenging task, especially when encountering fractions with unlike denominators. As the children are discovering, this is where a firm grasp on multiplication and division facts is needed. Gradually, they are getting the hang of it and are discovering the thrill of success.

Special congratulations go to **Avi B** and **Elizabeth P** who earned bronze medals for the second Continental Math League contest. This is a great achievement!

4th Math

The “green” group is now working on advanced computation of fractions and mixed numbers. It has really stretched their thinking, but they are beginning to reap the benefits of their hard work. Through their efforts and lots and lots of practice, they are seeing success.

The “magenta group” is working on problem solving using the Singapore Math Challenging Word Problems text. This method of problem solving is unique in its approach and has been proven to be a valuable tool for children as they encounter various word problems.

3rd-4th Science

I am very proud of the effort the third and fourth grade students put into their ecosystem books. After learning about ecosystems and their dynamics, pairs of students chose an ecosystem to research. They compiled the cool facts they learned into an ABC book (a fact is given for each letter of the alphabet) or a Fact or Fiction book (a statement is made; on the next page it's revealed whether the statement was fact or fiction and an explanation is given). The final products exceeded my expectations!

The students cannot wait to begin our health unit. We'll begin by learning about the different body systems, focusing most on the muscle and skeletal systems.

Students will learn about the structure and functions of bones, joints, and muscles through investigations that require them to build models of the body and test their own physical skills and reaction times. Additionally, we're lucky to have a number of parent volunteers willing to come speak to the classes about various health-related topics.

Instead of a hike in the woods last month, we visited the Bay Village Nature Center. The scientists did an excellent job classifying animals into categories such as nocturnal, diurnal (active during the day) and crepuscular (active during twilight hours), carnivore, omnivore, herbivore, and more. On March 3rd, we'll take our monthly outing to the park with a special twist. We'll take a guided tour of the Sugarbrush Trail to learn about sap-collecting. At the end of the hike, we'll have a chance to try maple sugar candy. Yum!

3rd Social Studies

Students enjoyed a visit to the Natural History Museum. They traveled through time, learning about the different American Indian groups of Ohio along the way. Many thanks go out to the parents for volunteering to drive!

3rd Grade: We have been enjoying our Pilgrim Simulation, getting hands-on experience of what the Pilgrims went through upon arrival to the “New World”. Be sure to ask how your child's “colony” is fairing!

4th Grade: We have continued our study of Ohio, enjoying activities along the way. The students have been practicing pulling out important information from the text, taking the information and organizing it in a clear way.

3rd Spanish

The students learned vocabulary about the food groups, completed crossword puzzles, and spoke sentences. The students are learning the “Son Cubano” a traditional Cuban dance to represent Cuba in the Spanish program on April 30.

4th Spanish

The students learned about clothing. They memorized the vocabulary and worked in the workbook. They learned possessive adjectives in the lesson: Mi casa es su casa. The students are learning the “Son Cubano” a traditional Cuban dance to represent Cuba in the Spanish program on April 30.



5th-6th Computer

We worked hard on typing for a few weeks in a row. We will go back to another few weeks of typing after spring break. We are also discovering how to use Google Docs. The students created a quiz for each other to take based upon the unit they completed in social studies on Greece. It was a great way to review the facts from the unit and learn software that they had never seen before. The students loved using Google Forms and have asked to do more with this great tool.

5th Language Arts

SEE 3rd-5th Language Arts

6th Language Arts

Students have been practicing expository writing starting with how-to's and giving directions. What appears simplistic actually requires a lot of clarity to convey.

5th-8th Math

At all grade levels we have been focusing on re-working problems we have already solved. However when we solve the same problems a second time, we are looking for patterns and processes that we can both identify and practice more directly. The result has been wonderful as students learn to be independent learners, identifying their shortcomings and then do targeted practice that can help them build fluency and efficiency.

Continental Math League

Gold Award: Darius Z, Vinayak K, Pheby L, Prathna K, Kavya R, Nate C, Sunny R, Sue R, Trevor L, Marla B, Prithvi P, Vikas N, Sarah D, Brad S, Hannah Y, Shawki A, Deepak K, Zaeem M, Carl F C, and Clare P

Silver Award: Michael T, Alexis H, Haley Y, Katelyn V, Clive C, Hajira A, Kareem T, Dhweeja D, Sachi G, Hassan S, Amir F, A.J. S, Sean F, Munim M, Ben W, Grant F, and Nardine T

Bronze Award: Anthony C, Marco B, Ammar M, Shan S, Peter A, Jorgen K, Naomi W, Christine B, Alexander I, Nicholas J, Nathan C, and Mahmoud A

Math Olympiads

Gold Award: Darius Z, Kavya R, Clive C, Christine B, Nate C, Hajira A, Kareem T, Dhweeja D, Sunny R, Sue R, Hassan S, Prithvi P, Brad S, Hannah Y, Sean F, Nathan C, Munim M, and Lulu Sun

Silver Award: Ammar M, Peter A, Jorgen K, Cameron S, Sachi G, Trevor L, Marla B, Alex P, Shawki A, Deepak K, Ben W, Zaeem M, Grant F, Clare P, and Miguel P

Bronze Award: Anthony C, Vinayak K, Maya F, Grace X, Prathna K, Anna H, Shan S, Naomi W, Sarah D, A.J. S, Mahmoud A, Peter C, and Zach I

5th Reading

Our class has recently completed a historical fiction unit. After reading Amos Fortune as a class book in January, students selected individual books on colonial and Indian, slavery, or pioneer topics. There is a broad selection of top children's literature in these historical periods. Our focus was a deeper study of setting, going deeper than "time" and "place" to recognizing how the contextual setting affected peoples' daily lives. The primary goal with this unit was to enhance the richness of history and story with the class. We have now started an animal fiction unit and students are reading either *Gentle Ben*, *Big Red* or *Where the Red Fern grows*. These wonderful choices exemplify the theme of love and loyalty. In addition, we will explore the plot components of introduction, sub-problems or conflicts through the story's rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. At the end of the unit, students will produce their own plot pop-up books.

6th Reading

The class has completed the *Rats of NIMH* unit. Students have finished individual books with chapter summaries and lovely illustrations. They also wrote a three paragraph essay on the dual plot line of the book and themes of courage and self-sacrifice. We are beginning a second animal fantasy, the classic *Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. Grahame's book is drenched with his style of rich words, sensory imagery, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. We are already enjoying these "golden" words! As we get into the story of Rat, Mole, Badger and Toad, ask your child to describe the characters for you: who is impetuous? arrogant? pragmatic? wise? boastful? Finally, the story is a beautiful demonstration of the themes of "friendship" and "home, sweet home".

5th-6th Science

In between preparing for the science fair the 5th graders are began an astronomy unit and the 6th grade class started a study of prokaryotes and eukaryotes (cells). Together they will travel to the Natural History Museum for a program called Target Moon for a lesson in the Planetarium and Observatory.



On March 29th there will be an informational meeting for any parent with questions about the June trip to CVEEC (Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center). We will meet in the Resource Room at 7:00 p.m.

5th and 6th Grade Science Fair

Students presented their projects to **Mr. and Mrs. Waldal, Dr. Dasarathy, Mrs. Balic, Mrs. Bartlett, Mrs. Hughes, Mrs. Kumar, and Dr. Haskins** on Science Fair Morning, February 25, 2010. Later they were interviewed by **Mrs. Tzeng's** seventh grade LA students. Finally, they had a chance to present them to the Birchwood Community during Science Night.

Dhweeja D will take her project to the Western Reserve District 5 Science Day at Akron University on Saturday, March 20.

5th Grade projects:

Marco and Katherine: Principles of Flight

Anthony: Wind: The New Electricity

Maya: Laundry Detergents

Anna and Alexis: Electricity and Fruit

Adam: My Heart Beat Slower Than Hers?

Vinny: Going Bananas Over Ripe Bananas

Pheby and Grace: Liquid-y Chickweed

Prathna and Haley: Sugar Crystals

Ammar and Darius: Pendulous Pendulum

Michael: The Helicopter

6th Grade projects:

Cameron: Blackjack

Dalya: Vascular Plants

Hajira: The Electromagnetic Experiment

Christine: Incandescent Plants

Clive: Avian Osteoporosis

Shan: Forces Basics

Kavya: Can We Match Up to Antibacterial Soap?

Nate: Barometric Pressure: How Does It Relate to Temperature and Relative Humidity?

Alex: Submarines and Buoyancy

Sachi: Acids, Bases, and Neutrals

Dhweeja: Do germinating seeds have greater protein content of better quality than dry lentil seeds?

Jorgen: Composing Compost

Kareem: The Fastest Growing Seed in Potting Soil

Katelyn and Naomi: Paper Towel Olympics

Peter: Plant Growth and CO₂

5th Spanish

They learned how to elaborate affirmative and negative questions. They also worked on Jose Marti the famous Cuban writer. They translated his biography and part of the "Versos Sencillos" to recite in the Spanish program. Good Job!

6th Spanish

They learned differences between schools in Latin America and schools in USA as well as schedules and classes that children take in the Hispanic countries. The students worked on "Los Pasatiempos" (pastimes). They conversed with a partner about what they like to do after school or on weekends. They learned the verb ir (to go), and complete sentences and exercises in the workbook.

7th-8th Computer

We have been working on websites using Google Sites software. The students worked in groups to create a school store website. We will be judging them and deciding which site is the best and then it will be available online to place orders for the store. When students finished that they started working on a website about a place in the world they would like to go. They are learning how to search for images, links, and videos to put into their website.

7th-8th Language Arts

The format for five paragraph essays is rudimentary in expository writing. Students are starting with a topic of their choice, using the essay map to organize their ideas. Just formulating a workable thesis statement (that is not too broad or too narrow) with supporting details is taking several sessions.

7th-8th Math

SEE 5th-8th Math

7th-8th Reading

With the Literature Show behind us, our focus in poetry has shifted from appreciating-speaking to reading-interpreting-and writing. Both reading classes read the poem "Miss Rosie" by Lucille Clifton. In this poem the poet considers a homeless woman, and she discovers her own sympathy and respect for the dignity of fellow human beings. After discussion and journal reflection, each student wrote a poem on the theme "Looking into the eyes of a Haitian child". These are posted in the main hallway.



Next, the 7th graders analyzed a handful of poems to see how different poets captured a memory using a variety of structures. We saw how poets can embed their feelings into a well-crafted description of a simple routine or cherished memory. With a model of their choosing as a base, students wrote memory poems. As the poems were shared, we truly enjoyed hearing these poetic personal memories. The class is also focusing on the golden sentences written by Jack London in his books (*The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*) to see how prose can “sing” and “dance” as well.

The 8th graders studied a variety of poems together in order to interpret the strong feelings conveyed in each. Then they put their own pens to paper and wrote a poem in the same fashion. Coupled with this, has been a look at the poetry of Madeleine L'Engle who addresses philosophical themes with rich language. This led to a discussion of metaphor. Students located other poems which contain strong themes and metaphors. Both these and their original poetry are typed for rich times of sharing.

7th Science

Students studied plate tectonics and spent a week looking at different sands under the microscope. You may think that all sand is the same, but sands from different regions are made of different minerals. We were able to look at sand that the **Issa** family and the **Zyke** family gave us, as well as some other sands.

In December the class submitted daily data for the surface temperature field campaign. Currently they are continuing and expanding the study and may take their research to the Satellites Geospatial Technology Conference April 27, 2010 at the Penta Career Center. There K-12 and university students present their research in the form of a poster board presentation.

8th Science

Students studied viruses, bacteria, and protists. They learned how to use the microscope and how to make wet mount slides, and onion cells and viewed protists. **Mahmoud**, **Miguel**, and **Zach** were able to use their cell phones to take pictures of the protists through the microscope. They composed power points of extremophiles, bacteria that live in extreme environments.

7th Spanish

The seventh graders learned about Celebrations in San Antonio Texas. They made invitations to their own party. They wrote the script “From Havana to Miami” the story of a family leaving Cuba. They researched facts and wrote the play to show in the Spanish program.

8th Spanish

The students worked in the preparation of the placement test for High School. They learned irregular verbs in present and preterit, possessive adjectives and pronouns, reflexive verbs, and reflexive pronouns. The students practiced translation and comprehension reading stories of Cuba. They wrote a script about four American students going to Cuba for vacation who had to deal with a taxi driver who didn't know English. The story had many other situations that made it fun while still mixing in real facts.

Thank you to **Mr. Jose Venero** for sharing his personal experiences of Cuba to the 7th and 8th grade students, it was a good help in the elaboration of the scripts.

Language Arts **Competition Announcement**

A representative from the Scholastic New York regional office called the school with exciting news. Several students in the seventh and eighth who entered the Scholastic Writing Awards competition are Gold Key winners. All these entries are eligible for the national Scholastic competition. The following are synopses of their writing:

Trevor L wrote *Next Year*, a memoir about his experience in a summer baseball league where his mediocre team rose in the ranks to play in the championships.

Vikas N wrote a fantasy entitled *Briefcase* about a boy's brush with the dark forces as he struggled to make sense of his father's dying gift even as he was defending a friend.

In *The Treasure* **Susmita R** wrote a short short story about how a bullied boy faced his adversity in a race to hunt for treasure.

Shawki A's *The End* was a short short story exploring the life of an addict and his influence on a young adolescent entrusted to his care.



My Brother and Me is **Nathan C's** memoir about the escapades he finds himself in as he follows his brother's apparently innocuous suggestions.

Dog Trouble is another memoir. **Deepak K** writes about his horrific ordeal with ferocious dogs as a young child and explains his family's intense phobia of dogs.

Miranda M in *Here, Fishy Fishy* describes an innocent experience one summer of how she and her friends try to save a stranded fish near the shores Lake Erie.

In the science fiction piece entitled *Mission 274, Colony 531*, **Mohammed M** writes a story about a scientist who embarks on a journey of fact finding, only to discover other truths about himself and his friend.

It was not until **Lulu S** visits her grandma in China, while making the acquaintance of her cousins, that she learns a valuable lesson in the piece entitled *Follow*.

Nardine T submitted two pieces, *Coolio and That Day*. *Coolio* explores her thoughts and inner feelings as she witnesses a young friend's suffering and fight against cancer. *That Day* is a fictional short short story about how a young woman coped with parents who invited themselves to dinner after being estranged for several years.

Ben W was also recognized for both of the pieces he submitted. *The Spelling Bee* was a short story about how the friendship of two friends, both vying for first place in the National Spelling Bee, endured the trials, jealousy, and pressure inherent in the contest. His other piece called *Extreme Sports* redefined his understanding of the venue as he described the adventure and peril he experienced in his first whitewater rafting trip down the Ohio Pyle River.

Congratulations to these young writers whose manuscripts will be sent on to the national office for judging. We wish them the best of luck.

MathCounts Team Wins First

We did it!!! Our MathCounts team of team of **Mohammed M, Nathan C, Kavya R, and Clive C** came in first place in the chapter level of the MathCounts competition held at Cleveland State University, February 13. In addition, **Mohammed** came in second place, **Clive** in third, **Kavya** in fifth, **Nathan** in seventh, and **Nate** in 12th place. The team will head to Columbus on Saturday, March 13 to compete against other Ohio teams for a chance to go to the national level. To prepare, the students are putting in extra time at school and at home studying problems from previous math competitions. Good luck students!!!

Jr. Math Club for Fifth and Sixth Grade Students

Because of the MathCounts team success, I had to postpone the start of our Jr. Math Club even though the fifth and sixth grade math enthusiasts are "biting at the bit" to get started. As soon as we complete preparation for the MathCounts state finals, we will begin Jr. Math Club where students will learn skills in solving advanced math problems. We will focus on identifying problem patterns and developing fluency.

Power of the Pen Regional on February 20 at Kent State University

Congratulations to regional qualifiers:

Seventh graders - **Marla B, Trevor L, Hassan S, Hannah Y**
Eighth Graders - **Miranda M, Lulu S, Ben W**

Trevor L took home the first place trophy for seventh graders, along with the Jane Heap Memorial Award that included a savings bond, and a Best of Rounds.

Students who advance to the state level will compete in Wooster College on May 21, Friday.

A big thank you to **Rozina Sayed** who sacrificed a Saturday to chaperone the students.



COMPETENCY AND MOTIVATION

Part V

Nurturing a Growth Mindset

All students should develop a growth mindset: those who assume they are “bright” and those who do not. In either case, if children develop a growth mindset they develop a life pattern that fosters hope. Whenever they take on a new activity, whenever they face a new stage in life, they will focus on how to improve and grow.

Developing a growth mindset begins with changing children’s perceptions, and changing the language that supports those perceptions. The result is student progress and success.

I love teaching mathematics because this process is so evident. Students march into my class in the fall with clear notions about their mathematical prowess, or lack thereof. When Julie entered my class one September, she warned me ahead of time, “I’m not good at math.” She wanted to make sure that I understood why she was going to fail and why I should go easy on her. That’s how a fixed mindset works in a child who assumes she is not capable. On the other hand, Linda entered the same class possessing a stellar mathematics history in the fourth grade. She was at the top of the class. She also gave me a “heads up” on the first day of school: “Hey, Mr. D, I’m really good at math!”

Both students had a fixed mindset. Both had drawn conclusions about their abilities, and I knew from experience, they both would perform up to the level that justified what they believed about themselves. Julie would begin pouting from the first day, lamenting her lack of mathematical brain power while Linda would thrust herself into her work to show-off her competencies and impress her new teacher. Of course, little did Linda realize that old Mr. D knows quite well that when she encounters math skills that she will not understand simply by raw talent alone, she too would slip into a mathematical “funk” and decide she is not as good at mathematics as she first believed.

For both students it was time to reshape their mindset and to learn a new language that would support that mindset.

I told Julie about some of my math students from the past who claimed they were not “good” at math. I described the power of practice, focused efforts, and the necessity of pushing yourself. Then with supportive coaching, focused instruction, repetition, steady and detailed support, and warm, loving encouragement, Julie learned! She experienced success and she loved it. From this starting point I could tell her, “Look what you did! You practiced. You worked hard. You did not give up. And you got it!” At this point my praises are only reinforcing the intrinsic satisfaction of accomplishment. Julie is on her way toward building a growth mindset.

Linda’s experience is a little different. She could do just about everything I gave her during the first month of school. I realized I had a very bright girl on my hands and it was time to give her more challenging work. She could do more and should do more, so I congratulated her on her efforts and asked her if she would like to attempt some very advanced concepts. She beamed. “Definitely, Mr. D. Bring it on!”

Round #2 was a little different. I made sure the level of work was at such a level that she would not understand it without some of the same efforts Julie had to learn: practice, focused effort, and self-discipline. The initial results were interesting. Julie did not understand how to do the problems and she simply quit. She said, “I can’t do this” - period. And I thought; “Good,” now we can talk about effort. Now we can begin nurturing a growth mindset that would, in turn, enable Linda to develop and realize her full potential in mathematics.

Next month we will continue our discussion of how to nurture a growth mindset.