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Created Nov 19 2009 - 1:00pm



[1] LEICESTER CENTRAL SCHOOL kindergarten/pre-kindergarten teacher Becca Schutz works with students Olivia Miner, left, and Hayden Bernhardt Monday morning. Schutz is giving a presentation about Leicester's innovative combined classroom curriculum this week at a national conference in Washington, D.C. Independent photo/Trent Campbell

LEICESTER — On Monday morning, the 14 youngest children at Leicester Central School were hard at work in their colorful classroom. They listened to a story on a rainbow rug in one corner, speaking up from time to time to ask questions. The opposite wall was covered with art projects and construction paper cutouts.

The children ranged in age from four to six, and they were part of the school's combined pre-k and kindergarten program, which is in its third year. The innovative curriculum is beginning to receive national recognition: class teacher Rebecca Schutz and home-school coordinator Nancy McGill are delivering a presentation on it at this week's National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conference in Washington, D.C.

Schutz explained that she and McGill had been chosen to speak at the conference because it is a multi-age program and it is in a public school.

"Both of those things are fairly rare," she said.

Before the pre-k program began, most Leicester parents took their young children to Middlebury, Brandon or Rutland for preschool programs. Some still do, but the school's pre-k program offers another option for Leicester children.

"We wanted to make sure that pre-k-age children in the town were being served and had a place to go," said Schutz. "As far as we know, in the past few years every four-year-old child in town has been going to preschool somewhere. We've just made it accessible for everybody."

There are benefits of having a preschool program within a public school. The children in the pre-k program take art and physical education classes, have access to the library and to the school breakfast program, and are able to take the morning bus to school, although they need to be picked up at noon.

And the biggest advantage that the pre-k students gain, educators say, is simply being at the school.

"The kids, at a very young age, are getting to learn the people at the school and feel safe," said McGill, who started at Leicester in 1988 as the school's first kindergarten teacher.

The seven pre-k students in the class are able to ease into the school routine — they go to school five days a week, but they finish at noon each day. In the afternoons, the smaller class of kindergarteners do more in-depth work.

The range in student age in the classroom might seem difficult to teach to, but to Schutz and para educator Diane Randall the small class size allows them to work to each student's ability.

"You have to read your children, and I think we try hard to do that" said Randall, who teaches art and language. "If we have a class that is ready for a little bit more of a challenge, we try to adjust that way. We let them lead us."

The class is primarily play-based, which gives even more flexibility.

"Children can be doing the same activity but getting different things out of it depending on where they are developmentally and what they're ready to learn," said Schutz.

And the learning doesn't stop when the children leave school. One of the components of the pre-k/kindergarten program is a family night every six weeks. Sometimes the school brings in a speaker, or families do projects and activities with the children. Sometimes there is a potluck, or the children will bake something during the day to serve to their parents that evening. According to McGill, almost 90 percent of the families in the program participate.

“It’s helped to build a community,” said Schutz.

Hannah Sessions, a Leicester School Board member and mother of a pre-k student and a second-grader, said she hoped the program would build parent involvement.

“It’s a chance for families that might be new to the school to meet other families,” she said. “I think what we’ll find is that if you get a parent involved at the very beginning, they will stay involved throughout their child’s time here.”

After two years in the program, both the parents and the children have become comfortable with the school.

“The second year parents are here, they feel secure enough to share concerns with us,” said McGill. “When we have (the children) for the second year, they land in kindergarten ready to be leaders, ready to learn, and self-assured.”

The pre-k/kindergarten program recently earned four stars from the state’s accreditation system, and the school will be applying for a more rigorous NAEYC certification, as well.

“It’s interesting going through this accreditation process because a lot of the paperwork is not designed for programs within a public school,” said Schutz. “It’s something new that people are figuring out.”

And it is a program that the school is proud to support. Co-principal Carol Eckels spoke warmly of the work Schutz, McGill and Randall have put into the program, and of the national recognition they are getting at this week’s NAEYC conference.

“One of my dreams when I came to Leicester was to start a preschool program,” she said. “By the time (the kids) get to second grade, we really see (the difference).”

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