

Students study craft of writing in Leicester

Project goes beyond standardized testing

By ANDREA SUOZZO

LEICESTER — Forget about teaching writing for standardized tests. These days at Leicester Central School, it's all about the craft of creating essays, fiction and poetry.

In classes from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade at Leicester, and in some classes at Brandon's Neshobe School, students are focusing on reading and writing in a different way: seeking out inspiration, getting into the flow of writing and, afterward, revising their efforts in workshops.

And it's not just students: Teachers are also working in small groups to discuss and revise their own writing.

All of this is part of a hands-on course on teaching writing led by Lisa Italiano, director of the University of Vermont's Green Mountain Writing Project.

For Leicester co-principal Kate Grodin, the push to revitalize the writing instruction at her school began three years ago eventually led to Italiano.

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LEICESTER CENTRAL SCHOOL teacher Linda Horn works with students Rena Taylor, left, and Morgan LaPorte on story leads during a writing workshop at the school recently. The once-a-month workshop takes the emphasis off of test preparedness and places it on a love of writing.

Independent photos/Trent Campbell

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Grodin reached out to Italiano, and the two discussed the work of Lucy Calkins, director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Calkins's teaching methods have proven popular in New York City, and focus on

teaching reading, writing and inquiry as integrated topics.

"There are so many connections in reading and writing, but kids have seen them as separate items. Teachers have, too," said Grodin.

Over the past two years, Grodin and Italiano have led a number of workshops encouraging teachers to re-envision teaching methods, but this year they decided to take on an entire Calkins curriculum, from her book "Units of Study for Teaching Writing."

Teachers assemble once a month for the classes, which begin in a classroom observing a writing class and end with the teachers in groups discussing strategies for teaching writing and revising their own pieces.

"It's the idea that teachers should be writing so that they know what their students are going through," said Grodin.

The writing that students are creating and reading runs the gamut from poetry to journaling, fiction to nonfiction, and the course encourages students to explore different genres.

"We go through the genres, but ultimately (the course) shows that writing is transferable," said Grodin.

And the students aren't just writing for assignments — according to the teachers gathered in a Leicester classroom on a recent Thursday afternoon, they're beginning to write because they want to express their own stories.

"My students come in after the weekend and they say, 'I want to write about something that happened,'" said Kelly Coolidge, a third grade teacher at Neshobe School who adds that her students are beginning to see story topics everywhere.

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"It's all about getting the bug," said Laura Coro, who teaches third and fourth grade at Leicester.

And the program highlights areas that students don't generally encounter in assignment-based writing classes, like close reading and revision of work they've already completed. Students read their work

to the class or to themselves, then do revision exercises like picking out the central moments in each piece.

"Kids are really flawless at finding the heart of the story," said Italiano.

Though the course only began in November, Grodin said she's already seen an improvement in the quality of the writing that students in all grades are doing. Overall, she said, as students focus more on the craft of writing, test scores tend to go up. But that's not the end goal of the new writing program.

"Ultimately we want the kids to love writing, and to view themselves as writers," Grodin said. "We want to teach them that people want to hear what they have to say."

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LEICESTER CENTRAL SCHOOL teacher Laura Coro works with student Steven Shackett during a writing workshop at the school.



LEICESTER CENTRAL SCHOOL teacher Laura Coro listens to student Hunter Ladd describe a favorite passage from a book during a writing workshop at the school.