



...w him! The Cat in the Hat! We looked! Then we saw him step in on the mat! We look... t in the Hat! We looked! Then we s...



Empowering Curious, Creative Learners

D.C. Everest multi-age elementary school
provides student-centered environment

Pam Gresser

In spring of 2017, a group of parents approached the D.C. Everest School District with a proposal for a K-5 multi-age elementary school. The district embraced the idea and Sarah Merz and I were hired to open a teacher-led, multi-age school that would personalize learning to meet the needs of each student.

We worked through the summer to create what is now known as Odyssey Elementary. The school's vision is to empower curious, creative learners to discover and connect in an innovative learning environment.

The multi-age philosophy at Odyssey Elementary is that every child can learn and has the right to do so at his/her own pace, diversity is not only a reality but something to

be embraced, and that our school is a family of learners. By purposefully structuring this school to include a span of ages from 6-11, students naturally have become more accepting of one another's differences. There is an atmosphere of nurturing rather than one of competition in which children pressure one another to fit an arbitrary norm.

We support each individual child as to their own set of needs rather than trying to lead a group of students to complete an age-based step. This philosophy has met students' social-emotional needs and their behaviors have drastically improved along with their academic success.

■ Building Partnership

Before the school year began, we

held meet and greets, a family picnic, and the exciting "one room school" transformation reveal night.

Throughout the year, we have had several family activities to bring everyone together like a Thanksgiving feast, Passion Project nights where students showcase their work, and of course student concerts.

Consistent communication with our parents is important. We communicate through notes, mass email messages, and connecting with parents in person at arrival and pick-up times. We also work hard to "tell our story" on social media so parents see the amazing things their child/ren are doing. We made it a priority to engage parents early to let them know that they are welcome, respected and that we value them as a part of our school.

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■ Relationships Matter

Developing and maintaining a strong community is the foundation of Odyssey Elementary. Each day begins and ends together, as one family of learners. When we gather to begin our day, it gives us an opportunity to set a tone of community and engaged learning. We have a peaceful end to our day as we gather one last time before going home. Community time helps to build trust and cooperation as we celebrate, reflect and take risks which help children gain a sense of belonging.

■ Student Led

Because we have watched many of today's children lose their curiosity in our classrooms, teaching inquiry is a part of our mission statement. Our instruction is built out of children's curiosity, rather than from a textbook or a purchased curriculum.

Each day, our students are engaged in lessons with their hearts and minds by discovering, investigating and exploring during lessons that meet the same Common Core State Standards that purchased curriculums meet.

These hands-on activities empower curious, creative learners to make choices and take responsibility for their learning in an exciting way which engages them in the learning process.

In a student-centered environment, children are empowered to take a lead in their educational experience. For instance, we have various clubs that have been initiated and are led by students. These include, Knitting Club, Coding Club, Lego Club, Gaming Club and K'nex Club.

I'm especially proud of these student-led clubs. Students submitted a proposal to me and then presented it during our morning community time. The leaders of the groups are responsible for organizing weekly activities. In October, a few students organized a drive to collect Halloween candy to send to

those serving in the military.

In fact, the name of our school, Odyssey Elementary, came from our students. Four students represented our student body and went to a school board meeting in January with their proposal. The school board approved their proposal.

■ Inquiry-Based Learning

To create a culture of questioning and investigation, I record topics that interest our students. Then students pursue these topics and keep track of their research along the way. Children come up with questions that are more profound and more original than I would ever dream of. When we turn the classroom over to student-driven inquiry, we turn on the "curiosity switch" of our students and empower them to

grapple, persevere, and learn about topics they are passionate about while mastering standards.

■ Individual Goals

Students are empowered to set weekly academic and personal goals and then reflect on their learning and work habits. Because this is not an innate skill, I teach and review this constantly. Aristotle said, "Man is a goal-seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goals."

Having specific goals helps everyone be more productive. An important part of goal setting is reflecting on what we need to work on, improve or learn. Before students can set a goal, they think of something that is worth working towards, something that interests

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dce.k12.wi.us/odysseyelementary

or

facebook.com/DC-Everest-Odyssey-Elementary-School

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them or a skill they need to improve upon. We teach our students how to set goals and achieve them, which teaches our children the important life skill of perseverance.

■ Moving Forward

After the first semester this school year, more than 125 children were on a waiting list to attend Odyssey Elementary for next school year. Because of the interest, the district is hiring two more teachers for next year and will be doubling our enrollment. A lottery drawing was held to determine which children would be added to the current enrollment.

In addition, all of our students stayed with us the entire school year. Given the non-traditional nature of our school, we wondered if we would find that the unstructured, student-led environment wasn't right for some students. Instead, we saw our students flourish. Technically, we did have one student leave, but that



was only because his family moved to another state.

Opening a teacher-led, multi-age school that is personalized to meet all students' needs is one of the hardest things I've ever done in my career, but it's also been one of the most amazing experiences. This

challenge has ignited a fire within me that burns brighter every day and I can't wait to see where Odyssey Elementary and these children go. ■

Pam Gresser is a teacher at Odyssey Elementary in the D.C. Everest School District and was the 2017 Wisconsin Elementary Teacher of the Year.

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