

African Centered Education ACE



Four educators from the Oakton School in Evanston, Illinois visited Madison on Friday, February 11 and spent the afternoon at Lowell Elementary School. Oakton School is an ACE (African Centered Education) school and the visitors wanted to see how this initiative is carried out at Lowell. Many of the Lowell activities are done in cooperation with three other schools, Hawthorne and Mendota on the east side and Falk on the west side.

Through the efforts of Katharine Goray, principal Lisa Kvistad and a team of teachers, Lowell has introduced ACE into the school environment as a way to approach the achievement gap and as a foundation for meaningful curriculum. Many of the school's art, music and literacy activities incorporate the seven principles of Kwanzaa as developed by Dr. Maulana Karenga. Those seven principles are UMOJA (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujimaa (collective work), Ujama (cooperative economics); Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity) and Imani (faith). The teachers are finding that the Kwanzaa principles, called the Nguzo Saba, can be absorbed by cultures other than the African American culture, without altering their essence.

Lowell has infused a daily affirmation, *I Am Somebody*, into the morning breakfast program, morning meetings, monthly assemblies and school events.

ACE uses a significant amount of children's literature that exemplifies the seven principles while adhering to the district's literacy standards. Children are expected to identify ACE principles and values in books and are exposed to different literary forms such as nonfiction, narrative, poetry, proverbs, folk tales and biographies.

In the realm of art, the visitors saw that throughout the school, the seven principles were repeated in different art forms and that the adinkra symbols appeared all over the school in banners, paintings and displays. In the auditorium, for example, some of the wall space is painted a bright green with the adinkra symbols. School-wide artistic talent is demonstrated in two programs, a Winter Fine Arts Showcase and a Spring Fine Arts Showcase.

ACE and the seven principles work in combination with Lowell's three major themes for this year—Ghana, trains and the Harlem Renaissance. The students are studying Ghana in the literary curriculum and will do a performance, an exhibition and a service learning project reflective of Ghana. Through a penny project, Lowell students are raising money to establish a school library that is needed for children in Gbifi, Ghana.

The train theme is an entree into American history, with emphasis on the underground railroad, the Great Migration, mass transit, the circus which is a key part of Wisconsin history and the emerging importance of high speed rail.

The Harlem Renaissance theme fits perfectly with the Kwanzaa principle of Kuumba (creativity) with a literary emphasis on the Harlem Renaissance (HR) poets and famous writers, a music emphasis on jazz and an art emphasis on expressions and collage with study on the HR poets, jazz and improvisation. Continuing with the ACE initiative, Lowell students will learn the Black National Anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, written during this period.

Two opportunities exist at Lowell for participation in drum troupes. The visitors observed an after school drum instructional class taught by master drummer Yorel Lashley, director of Drum Power. These students perform at

school assemblies. Another drum group is designed for adults and hosted by Lowell.

During the wrap-up session, Lowell teachers told the Oakton educators about their Parent Empowerment Program. From past experience, they knew it was difficult to get parents out to a meeting. To overcome this, Lowell did extremely intensive messaging with parents, including sending a formal invitation, a follow-up flyer, phone calls, pasting stickers on children on the day of the event and providing taxi transportation for parents who needed that. Parents turned out in significant numbers.

Lowell staff described the events taking place at the Parent Empowerment Program. At the start, a video, *Bridge the Gap*, was shown. Then a report was given on crime statistics and prison population. The room was in shock when one of the teachers revealed that the number of prison beds to be built are determined by the quality of 3rd grade reading scores. Finally, an open discussion with parents took place. What was revealed is that parents are not comfortable coming to school and are apprehensive. "It's scary to go to school and see all white people," reported one parent. "Parents definitely wanted more Black teachers. Parents want to have a dialogue where they don't feel so alone with their problems."

Through an exchange of ideas between the Lowell Elementary teachers in Madison and the Oakton School teachers in Evanston, the best practices of ACE will be realized.

Photo: Lisa Kvistad, Lowell Elementary principal, Andrea Davis, Michelle Belvanis & Katherine Goray, all of Madison School District; Educators in kente scarves from Oakton: Karen Joseph, Claudia Braith Treadway

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