

Bringing ‘Gifted’ Education To All



Debbie Norwood’s kindergarten class at Stephen S. Wise Elementary School began a graphing project with a simple question: Are blue or brown eyes more predominate in their class? When their survey revealed brown eyes, one student wondered about the rest of the school. His question became the catalyst for a school-wide survey. The class discussed theory, making inferences, collecting evidence, and the difference between fact and opinion.

Two years ago, Wise Elementary was selected as a model school for gifted education by USC’s Rossier School of Education, and together USC and Wise implemented a plan to incorporate gifted education in every classroom. All students at the K-6 reform Jewish day school located along the Mulholland Corridor now learn to think like scholars. The gifted program is integrated into the curriculum for every student, not just those identified as gifted. While studying math, California history, science, art, literature and music, the students make predictions based on probability, conduct research, and prove theories with evidence.

“This is really about reframing education,” explains Karen Anderson, director of Curriculum & Instruction at Wise Elementary and an adjunct professor of education at USC. “It’s about creative and analytical thinking and sparking curiosity. It’s about starting out with an unanswered question and the steps you take to find the answer. The process is really the most important aspect of this type of learning.”

Dr. Sandra Kaplan, a USC professor and national expert in gifted education, leads the program. All Wise Elementary teachers, administrators, and specialists participate in ongoing training through USC.

“I’ve grown as a teacher,” says Norwood, who has been teaching kindergarten for 22 years. “This program gives the students the opportunity to think more deeply, to not just learn to answer questions, but to ask the questions.”

“Universal themes” such as power, conflict, and change are incorporated into lesson plans. While kindergarteners might discuss “change” in relation to the metamorphosis of a butterfly, fourth graders discuss



A student at Stephen S. Wise Elementary ponders questions about a class project.

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how the structure of power in California “changed” with the arrival of the Spanish settlers. Students are taught to evaluate ideas using multiple perspectives and analyze through the eyes of an economist, a sociologist, an anthropologist, a botanist, or an entrepreneur.

“It’s incredible to see the shift in thinking and the types of discussions that we’re now having,” says fourth grade teacher Pam Neal. “We’re going beyond memorizing facts to discussing conflict during early California history and how that relates to today and the conflicts in Iran and North Korea.”

The program has also encouraged greater interdisciplinary thinking and teaching. For example, when discussing “power and conflict,” one fourth-grader did a project on the music of Ella Fitzgerald and how segregation and conflict can lead to creativity and reform.

Danielle Quinto, a fifth-grade teacher, says this program allows her the freedom to discuss topics with more depth and complexity. “We’re able to connect the curriculum to real life,” she says. “When we discuss conflict in a book or a time in history, we can also discuss conflict within ourselves or within a group of friends and examine the moral and ethical ramifications. This is the type of critical thinking and exploring that I did when I was in graduate school. To be able to bring these ideas into my classroom is so exciting.”

– Elena Epstein