A TYPICAL DAY AT A CITIZENS OF THE WORLD CHARTER SCHOOL

As visitors walk the halls of a Citizens of the World Charter (CWC) school, they will hear sounds that are as diverse as our students themselves. Our program is designed to meet the needs of all students and our community is purposefully planned to support student learning. Those used to a quiet, orderly classroom of children sitting in rows of desks, all looking at the same page in a textbook, may at first be startled by the level of activity at a CWC school. Students of all ages are commonly engaged in animated debate and discussion about group projects, science experiments, and mathematical equations – working at individual desks, round tables, and even on the carpeted floor. The many different seating options at a CWC school allow all students to select workspaces best suited to their needs.

Students can be seen using hands-on tools, called manipulatives, to solve math problems, creating models and dioramas, and charting results from their tests of hypotheses. Student musicians, singers, dancers, artists, writers, and actors can be heard creating, practicing, performing, reading aloud, and critiquing, all processes for learning and means of demonstrating their understanding of the arts and core academic content. Students are engaged with educational software on classroom computers, or can be found researching on the Internet and taking notes. Others are exploring and experimenting in the school garden, planting indigenous foods of Native Americans as they study our nation’s history and development. Visitors may arrive during quiet times, when only hushed tones are heard as a class full of students and teachers read, write and reflect, individually or in small groups.

As students engage in active learning and make the curriculum their own in their journey to mastering the Common Core and state standards, teachers are formally and informally assessing their progress. Students master content and skills through a variety of methodologies that address in an individualized fashion the diverse array of intelligences, learning styles, talents, and challenges in every classroom. Teachers continuously tailor instruction to meet the needs of each student. Class structure varies from whole-class direct instruction to individual pursuits, small-group collaboration and instruction (including combining groups between different classrooms, based on skill level), and any other combination that fits the intellectual exploration at hand. CWC school teachers use a variety of instructional methods and ongoing formative and summative assessments continuously to determine whether, in fact, the lessons have had the desired outcome: student mastery of standards.

VIRTUAL TOUR

This virtual tour of the school reveals a myriad of approaches and structures at play. Based on their reflective analysis of student behaviors, classroom dynamics, and learning outcomes, teachers draw on their rich repertoire of instructional strategies to meet the individual needs of their students. A seamless blend of whole-group lessons, small-group instruction, and individual student conferencing takes place on a daily basis.

In a first-grade classroom, many learning activities happen simultaneously. Some students read self-selected stories at their own reading levels in the book nook. At the same time, a small group of students work with a teaching assistant to review strategies for deciphering tricky words before they start their independent reading as they strive to master the performance indicator “Know and apply grade level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.” As s/he finishes with that small group, the assistant calls a second group of three emergent readers who are English language learners. S/he leads them in reading a rhyming pattern book and focusing on phonetic awareness and vocabulary development. In a circle on the carpet, the teacher conducts a guided-reading lesson, modeling how expressive, fluent, oral reading promotes comprehension and enjoyment -- or in kid language, reading like you’re talking makes the story more fun to read and easier to understand. While on the surface the purpose may appear to be having a good time, the teacher knows that she is driving toward the performance indicator “Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.”
After spending a few moments in several classrooms, it becomes clear that classroom spaces are set up to facilitate students’ access to resources, including supplies, a word wall, sample texts and their own folders of past work. Student-created resource materials are displayed throughout the classroom and children are encouraged to move through the room purposefully to access materials as needed. Students are taught how to find answers without always turning to an adult for support. The teacher alternates roles throughout the day, sometimes delivering instruction and frequently facilitating independent learning activities for individual and small groups of children. While much is visible to an observer, what may be less evident are the standards that drive every aspect of instruction across the school.

In a third-grade classroom, students finish working independently and in pairs to complete the day’s Everyday Math challenge in their journals. Then three pairs of student share with the class the steps in their different approaches to getting a solution. The teacher presents a 15-minute lesson on a third possible algorithm for solving two-digit multiplication problems. Then students divide into their math groups. One group works on their ongoing statistics project, graphing the results of their student poll and preparing an analysis of the data. One group works with the teacher on a comparison of the three multiplication algorithms and taking a first step toward identifying the one that makes most sense to them as individual learners. The other group uses computers to access the online math practice and review materials to support and reinforce single-digit multiplication facts.

As one walks the hallways and drops into classrooms, rigorous learning activities and student engagement are apparent in all aspects of the instructional program. Teachers ask students to provide evidence for their reasoning. Children collaborate in small groups to work their way through the challenges presented by the teacher. Questions can be heard as they challenge each other to support their thinking and well-articulated statements soon follow as students refine their arguments.

Throughout the school, students regularly interact with their peers both in their own classrooms, as well as across grades, participating in performances and demonstrations, reading with upper-grade “book buddies,” and coming together to work on joint service-learning projects that incorporate and bring to life their academic lessons in real-world applications. Halls are filled with examples of student achievements and efforts, including detailed explanations to give context to each project displayed so students, teachers, parents, and other visitors can learn from the students’ work. The work displayed contains not only the finished product, but also artifacts that reveal something about the learning process. Displayed work enables other students to reflect on and learn from the learning strategies of their peers, which helps develop their metacognitive skills.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT OUR CULTURE

The faculty and staff at each Citizens of the World Charter school are dedicated to creating and fostering a school culture of joy and excitement in learning and celebrating the work students accomplish within and beyond our walls. The principal greets each child by name, and students commonly delight in reporting on their recent accomplishments. Parents are a common presence in our school, as enthusiastic supporters of student performances and demonstrations; volunteers in the classrooms, school office, lunch area and library; participants in weekly service-learning activities; and true “boosters” of our operation. This collaborative effort ensures that students feel enthusiastic about their school experience, supportive of their classmates, and supported by their teachers and parents in their learning and development.

CONTACT US

Andrea Arroyo, New Site Development and Community Engagement Director
Phone: (323)-305-4322
Email: andrea.arroyo@cwcschools.org
Website: www.citizensoftheworld.org

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