

# Students as Teachers

Empowering students to teach each other can transform schools.

By Cheri Sterman



**F**lipped learning—the concept of students serving as teachers to instruct, and learn from, their classmates—is revolutionizing the way students learn and engage with the curriculum. Several principals have embraced this flipped learner paradigm and have found unexpected benefits of deeper understanding and leadership skill-building. Interestingly, these principals report that their students-as-teachers initiatives began with an art experience. Based on the positive impact, it has been expanded to other subjects.

## Within Classrooms

A first place to experiment with flipped learning is in a single classroom. Student projects can revolve around teaching, exchanging ideas

with, or offering feedback to one another as a way to direct their own learning.

For example, students at Marshall School in South Orange, New Jersey, serve as docents who curate and explain the exhibits displayed in the school's Marshall Museum to their classmates and teachers. "There is no better way for a child to take ownership of an idea and deepen understanding than to articulate thoughts and rationale to one another," says principal Bonita Samuels.

Discussions among students are often initiated with the "turn and talk" approach, for which they follow a protocol of questioning and listening to each other. As an example, Marshall School art teacher Jessica Fong starts most lessons with



OPPOSITE PAGE: Libby Center, Spokane, Washington; LEFT: Thomas Street Elementary, Tupelo, Mississippi

The goal is to learn from their peers' insights. First graders respond to others' work by attaching thought-provoking sticky notes.

"Their collaborative reviews are remarkable as they discuss the craftsmanship and ideas," says Samuels. "It is common to overhear a child ask a classmate, 'Have you considered...?' This process extends beyond the art room. Once a child has cultivated a sense of leadership, it spreads into every aspect of the school."

Another area in which leadership has been extended is in conflict resolution. Rather than always depending on an adult to step in, children at Marshall School are expected to resolve their conflicts by visiting the Student Led Solution Center. Students, alongside adult coaches who intervene only if needed, have assumed mediator roles. This K-2 school has found young children have an amazing capacity for resolving conflicts as well as teaching and leading peers.

artistic inspiration and urges students to look carefully and build a hypothesis around the artist's intentions. She keeps her presentations very short to allot more time for students to share ideas with peers. These turn-and-talk conversations involve robust student-crafted questions, and answers need to be backed up with evidence and be rich in vocabulary.

"Our role is to inspire and empower students, not disseminate information," Fong explains. "It changes the way lessons are structured. ... We instill a passion for insightful questions. Students aspire to take their questions to a higher level."

At the Libby Center in Spokane, Washington, personal journals are used as a vehicle to help students understand themselves and their peers. Principal Debra DeWitt believes that the most important role students have as teachers is to help others understand them. "When students express their visual voices they document their own learning and help others see their thoughts," she says.

A simple journal can become a powerful tool to show how ideas emerge, evolve, and can be built on. Metacognition skills are built and strengthened through the process of translating a thought to paper and

then taking time to reflect on that thought. "We want students to ... be able to articulate [their thinking] to others," DeWitt explains. "The jour-

nals became the springboard used to teach each other about themselves."

Providing and responding to feedback is another way that students can increase their learning. Marshall School's students, as young as 6 years old, are encouraged to offer their feedback to other students' work, just like a teacher would provide.



Pleasant Hill Elementary, Pleasant Hill, Missouri





LEFT: Libby Center, Spokane, Washington; BELOW: Wylandville Elementary, Eighty Four, Pennsylvania




### Among Schools

Angie Brown, principal of E.T. Belsaw Mt. Vernon School in Mt. Vernon, Alabama, had an interesting dilemma that she resolved creatively. The small, rural K-8 school historically had limited access to art and cultural resources. Yet several schools, about 40 miles away in Mobile, are arts magnet schools. The possibility of a collaboration sparked Brown's curiosity.

She thought to herself: "What if we used the Crayola grant to fund transporting arts-proficient middle and high school students to come here to teach our kids?" It turned out to be a great idea. The student-teachers taught Mt. Vernon School students painting, drawing, music, and drama, sparking students' arts appetite and skills.

Students' interest in the arts piqued so much that they started a video project to share with their student-teachers what they were doing. On the days that student-teachers couldn't travel to Mt. Vernon, students connected remotely.

"This ignited something powerful within the kids," Brown explains. "They became leaders and helped classroom teachers think about how to integrate the arts into all sorts of lessons."

Whether they are students traveling to a rural school in Alabama, walking across their Ohio district campus or classmates leaning over a desk in Washington, students across the country are moving—into the role of teacher. Educators are stepping aside and letting these young masters write rubrics, mediate peer disputes, and jot notes with artistic feedback. Students are rising to the occasion and exceeding expectations as they teach other students. 

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11th grader how to use the middle school's 3D printers, Vollnogle reports. "Students learn that expertise is based on skills and attitude, not age," she says.

Russo describes how amazed sixth graders were that 6-year-olds were mature, had a strong work ethic, and were highly creative partners. "They didn't expect first graders to be thinking partners. They marveled at

the capabilities of younger students they were responsible for teaching." For the partnership, students were involved in crafting rubrics to assess projects. They talked about standards before and after the student-led collaborations, and student teams taught each other how to address the standards in the planning and creative processes.

Some unexpected benefits from this collaboration were the leadership skills students acquired:

- Sense of ownership and responsibility to plan and evaluate projects;
- Knowing (and debating) what excellence looks like;
- Realizing that when teachers step back, other students have a tremendous capacity to guide them; and
- Leadership depends on mindset, not age.

"When we make it clear we are all learners, there is no stigma in admitting 'I need help.' Acknowledging that everyone is both a teacher and a learner is a life skill we're proud to instill in our students," Samuel says.

### Between Grade Levels

Developing partnerships between teachers of different grade levels is another way to enhance the student-as-teacher experience. In East Palestine, Ohio, principals from an elementary school, middle school, and high school, along with their art teachers, partnered to plan collaborative projects where students teach students. Principals Carol Vollnogle and Kimberly Russo say the results exceeded their expectations.

Sixth graders were teaching 11th graders as well as first graders. For example, an 11-year-old taught an