



HIGHER ORDER THINKING SCHOOLS NETWORK
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Dynamic Program Opens Up the HOT Process

—Tiffany Caouette, Principal, Pleasant Valley Elementary School



Mira Stanley, Chuck Costa and the students of Pleasant Valley Elementary School write lyrics.

Parents are a vital piece of any school. Their support is extremely important to the success of a school. Parents often see the products from their children's experiences – performance assessments, quizzes, book reports, and other projects – but they rarely get to see the process that goes into getting to that final product. So what happens when a school has a teacher-artist collaborative and they want parents involved? You get a dynamic program that opens up the HOT process in a transparent way.

During October and November, Pleasant Valley Elementary School in South Windsor hosted a Teacher Artist Collaboration (TAC) between Connecticut Office of the Arts Teaching Artist

Chuck Costa and Mira Stanley and three classrooms – a second grade, a third grade, and a fourth grade. Students and the artists planned to write three songs in each classroom. The songs were to be tied to social studies concepts and the topic of community, beginning with a song about the classroom community, growing to a song about the school community, and moving onto a song about the local South Windsor and Hartford communities. As the teachers and artists began their collaboration on the planning day, they knew one of the goals they had was to involve parents in the process. Although the school is a HOT school and parents and community members are very familiar with the culminating projects from TACs, the

staff wanted to expose parents to the process the students would experience, including the brainstorming sessions that lead to the lyric writing.

Parents were invited to participate in the 8 sessions in each classroom and the three classrooms had a total of 12 parents participate, most more than once. Jody Bemis, mother of a second grade student, thought the process was extremely valuable for her. "The artists facilitated the session but it was really the kids that owned the content and outcome. And for the kids to have such a tangible outcome that they can be proud of was amazing to see."

Mrs. Bemis was not alone in her thoughts. The feedback from parents was overwhelmingly positive. Parents had been asked to document the TAC process – taking photographs, videos, and notes were a few of their tasks. They also scripted the questions used with students by the artists. Teachers felt that this allowed the classroom teachers to stand back and watch the process, freeing up their ability to plan what they would do for extensions when Chuck and Mira's sessions ended. The long-range goal was to continue the song-writing process throughout different curricular areas, and the teachers didn't feel they could really step back to plan that if they hadn't had help from parents.

For parents, though, their involvement was so much more than scripting and note-taking. Johanna Perkin, mother of a student in the TAC, found that her involvement really helped her understand the process the artists go through

with the students. "What struck me the most about the HOT experience was the way the children openly displayed their creative sides without any fear of ridicule. Additionally, I enjoyed watching the children work in a situation where there is no right or wrong answer – where all ideas are given equal weight and opportunity."

As the sessions ticked to a close, it was amazing for the parents to see the pace at which the process moved. "That moment when all their ideas and facts about their classroom community came together (and) the surprise and excitement in their voices and faces when they realized that their own words and their own ideas became a song right then and there" was the most important moment for Josie Nelson, parent of a fourth grade student.

For the staff at Pleasant Valley and other HOT schools, it has always been a challenge to show parents the process that is used to create wonderful student performances, artwork, and other masterpieces. The recent involvement in the TAC at Pleasant Valley has set the stage for how to involve parents in the future and open up the HOT process for all to see. Kristy Perry, mother of a third grade student, sums up the experience. "The collaborative effort of the artists in residence and the students has been highly fulfilling to observe. The students are actively engaged from the brainstorming process to performing their final works. This is a truly enriching program, and I know I made the right choice of settling (here)."