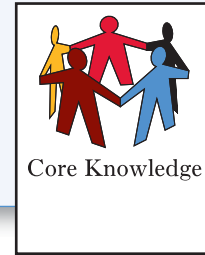


VI. Hamburg Pre-Kindergarten Hamburg School District, Arkansas



Preschool

Enrollment: 80

Low-Income: 100%

Non-White: 45%

Deep in the southeast corner of Arkansas, Hamburg School District works hard to prove that “rural” and “progressive” need not be mutually exclusive. This 1,600-student district in the Mississippi River Delta has offered high-quality public preschool education for nearly 15 years. Last year, its largest preschool, Hamburg Pre-Kindergarten, enrolled about 80 children, while three others, in the tiny hamlets of Portland, Wilmot, and Fountain Hill, together enrolled an additional 60.

With support from the Walton Family Foundation, Hamburg began implementing the Core Knowledge Preschool Sequence in 2001. To prepare, teachers attended training sessions over a two-year period, with each session focused on one area of the curriculum.

Susan Smith, director of the program, says the curriculum has been a boon for young children and families in this impoverished, heavily agricultural county. “We like the curriculum so much because we are in an area that doesn’t have a lot of culture. We don’t even have a movie theater. Core Knowledge brings in a lot of things, like art and music, that we just don’t have locally.”

Teachers also value its emphasis on early literacy and numeracy. “There are still families outside of [the town of] Hamburg, where we still have basic literacy problems,” says Ms. Smith. “They don’t have access to a community library they could go to, for example. So it was very important to bring in literacy they might not get at home.”

However, she adds, “It’s not an easy curriculum. Because it’s so broad, the biggest challenge is getting into the day or week all the things you want to teach them. You have to stay on task all day long.”

Such statements might send shivers down the spines of educators who know little about what good teaching looks like at the preschool level, conjuring up visions of stressed-out four-year-olds lined up in tiny desks. But Ms. Smith’s descriptions of her staff’s instructional strategies quickly dispel such myths. Instruction at Hamburg Pre-K is highly verbal, relies heavily on the use of physical objects or “manipulatives,” takes place in small groups as well as large, and includes healthy doses of choice and interactive play.

To those who would quail at the term “mathematical reasoning and number sense” in the Sequence, for example, Ms. Smith points out, “We always start in geometry with basic shapes, the circle, square, and triangle. We only go from one to ten recognizing numbers. We teach them to count to 20. We take it slowly. We get manipulatives out and say, ‘Give me five.’ To introduce them to subtraction, we might say, ‘If you had these three cookies and you ate one, how many would you have left?’”

Her teachers also make great use of songs. Ms. Smith illustrates by singing: *Five little ducks went out one day over the hill and far away ... Mother duck said quack quack quack quack quack ... but only four little ducks came back that day.* “How many ducks ran away and didn’t come home?”

When it comes to literacy, she says, “Our job isn’t to make sure every child has memorized the alphabet, but to have enough knowledge about it to build on later on. We do a lot of listening activities so they can recognize sounds. It’s not rote at all. The goal is for them to be ready to learn and to have a solid foundation to build on in kindergarten.”

The broad nature of the curriculum also provides many opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching. For example, teachers use the painting Noah’s Ark by Edward Hicks to learn about counting by two’s. And when teachers cover Johnson’s The Old Stagecoach, they connect to concepts in the “orientation in time and space” portion of the Sequence. “We talk about ‘long ago’ and ‘now,’ and we use the painting to compare what life was like long ago compared with now,” explains Ms. Smith.

Hamburg’s kindergarten teachers appreciate all that hard work. They also appreciate that the Core Knowledge approach to preschool includes explicit instruction in social skills.

“Stop and Think is our approach to social skills,” explains Ms. Smith. “When they are doing something wrong we don’t just say, ‘Stop that.’ We say, ‘Stop and think. What are you doing? What are your choices right now? Is it a good choice or a bad choice? What are you going to do now?’ It’s a way to help them think about their actions and social interactions rather than just telling them what to do, and research shows that it can help develop their vocabulary.”

Stop and Think has also provided Hamburg’s teachers with proof that children are taking the knowledge they gain with them into their homes and communities when they leave school for the day. “After we do Stop and Think for a week, the parents ask us, ‘What is this Stop and Think?’” says Ms. Smith. “It turns out the kids have been using Stop and Think at home with their parents!”



Hamburg doesn’t leave parent involvement to chance. Ms. Smith says that Core Knowledge has given her staff a way to help parents “really know what all this is about so they’re not left in the dark. We introduce them to the program and what we’re trying to achieve. [For example], we talk to them about how to read to their kids like we do. ‘What is the front of the book? What is the back? Who wrote it?’ Then when you are finishing the book, you ask children to retell it. They never understood what all they should be doing when they read a book to their child. [They never asked] questions like, ‘Who are the characters? What was the problem they had? How did they solve the problem? And what is your name? Susan. That starts with an S. Is the letter S in the page anywhere?’ ”

“Parents can help us teach children the difference between a letter and a word in the story,” she says. “Our parents love it. They love it so much.”