

The Littlest Learners

A look at four novel approaches to tailor childhood education to students' needs

By LAURA BENGIS

Clad in puffy coats and brightly colored beanies, 18 4-year-olds at Magee Elementary in the Kettle Moraine School District sit atop tree stumps on a brisk early spring afternoon listening to instructions for their next kindergarten project: starting seeds in the greenhouse.

Later, they'll practice drawing their names in mud using sticks and retell stories they've read using leaves, branches and pine cones as props. Before moving inside for dismissal, they'll sip hot tea with their afternoon snack and recount the activities of the day with drawings in their journals.

Pre-K classrooms in Milwaukee and beyond look quite different today than they did even two or three years ago,

says Leanne Evans, an associate professor of education at UW-Milwaukee.

While the pandemic was disruptive for adults, that time period painted the only reality many 3- and 4-year-olds can remember, says Evans, chair of UWM's early childhood education department. To help young children navigate life after such a formative time, she says, we need to more closely attune children's experiences with changes in social climate. "Caring for children doesn't happen in a vacuum," Evans says. "Those social factors outside of our school and child care settings deeply, deeply impact what is happening inside the walls of those educational spaces."

The pandemic also revealed inequities in education's ability to

address needs of different learners, especially those with disabilities, according to Maggie Bartlett, UWM associate professor and early childhood special education chair. She says educators are now more motivated to design different experiences that meet a variety of student needs. As part of the effort, Bartlett and Evans are developing a program at UWM to certify future educators in both general and special education for the youngest learners.

Evans says another way schools are better meeting children's needs is more focused collaboration among parents, schools and members of the local community. Different communities experience different challenges, so it's important for these conversations to occur within each school or district – not just on a broad scale, she says.

Here is how a few public schools across the Milwaukee area are reconceptualizing early learning experiences to meet their students' needs.



MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Improving access with language

Many of the thousands of Milwaukee Public Schools students speaking over 80 languages begin with 3K or 4K programs in bilingual education, language immersion, world language, first nations and ESL (English as a second language).

Bilingual programs – which teach English and Spanish to both native and non-native English speakers – improve access for children whose first language is not English by giving them an education in their native language while teaching English and bridging understanding of concepts in both languages. Beginning in 4K, some 90% of instruction in the bilingual classroom is delivered in Spanish. Slowly over the next five years, the English/Spanish distribution reaches a 50/50 balance, where it remains for the duration of the program.

Language immersion programs provide English-speaking children the opportunity to add a second language, delivering instruction only in the target language (Spanish, French or German), until the second grade, when English instruction is added. Lorena Gueny, MPS director of bilingual and multicultural education, says learning through immersion improves cognitive flexibility, attention span, memory and problem solving skills, contributing to a greater understanding of a student's primary language.

Language acquisition is easier at a younger age, notes Gueny; the earlier children start acquiring a language, the more fluid it will become. She says this kind of early exposure also builds an understanding of other cultures, especially for native English speakers.

HARTLAND-LAKESIDE, KETTLE MORaine

Learning in Wisconsin's natural settings

The Hartland-Lakeside School District's two elementary campuses feature over 30 acres of forest combined – the perfect setting to reconnect kids with nature, says outdoor education specialist Courtney Marschalek. She approached Hartland North Elementary



Teacher Rachel Weiss and the students in the Kettle Moraine School District's Forest 4K program use the 20 acres of outdoor space around Magee Elementary as a classroom.

as a volunteer 10 years ago with an idea that would optimize the then-untapped potential of the campuses' wooded areas.

Today, students in grades 4K through third grade meet with Marschalek once per month for alfresco learning on seasonal topics like bird counting, tracking or maple tapping.

Marschalek also creates and maintains outdoor spaces available to all teachers to use with their classes, like an outdoor classroom with a circle of benches and a yurt hand-woven with sticks by the outdoor education classes. She's built free play areas like an outdoor "mud kitchen" made of an old sink and wooden pallets and a loose parts lab with blue bins of plastic pipes, wooden blocks, rocks and other building materials. Natural play features like slides built into hills, a spiral labyrinth and balance beams are found throughout the forest.

Educators at Kettle Moraine's Magee Elementary saw a similar need and introduced Forest 4K this year. The afternoon outdoor program uses the campus's 20 acres as a classroom to

build skills using natural elements. Magee Elementary principal Justin Nies says Forest 4K is one of the largest 4K sections in the district with 16 students, which speaks to the community's support for a nature-based opportunity.

Forest 4K teacher Rachel Weiss says students spend the majority of the time in the wooded area among its walking paths, sandbox, water tables, outdoor kitchen, wagons and rowboat. Students also free play throughout 10 outdoor learning spaces, raised garden beds, a greenhouse, a butterfly garden, a traditional playground and a wooded area – areas accessible to all grades in the building as well.

Weiss says the research-backed benefits of outdoor learning include improved mental health, physical health, attention span and sleep. She says outdoor education especially helps young learners practice self-regulation skills, and she sees far fewer behavioral problems outdoors.

PEWAUKEE

Building literacy with background knowledge

One week, students identify letters on dinosaur bones that they dug up from an indoor faux stone pit. A few weeks later, they'll harvest foam vegetables labeled with letters from a felt garden and collect assigned numbers of plastic eggs from pretend chicken nesting boxes. Later in the year, they'll feed items that begin with certain letter sounds to a free-standing wooden shark.

When revamping its 4K program in 2020-21, Pewaukee Lake Elementary aimed to create a setting that resembled a children's museum, where children learn through play to build background knowledge. The idea was supported by findings from two Marquette University

researchers that background knowledge may be more helpful to growing readers than reading strategies.

Now, rather than gathering in one room, a teacher and students spend about three weeks at a time in each of 12 different themed spaces. Learning environments – with unifying themes like stories, polar regions, travel, the human body, farm-to-table and more – anchor practice with letters and numbers while also building knowledge.

In the program's first year, Pewaukee School District chief academic officer Danielle Bosanec says, the district saw an increase in literacy measures including uppercase and lowercase letter identification and letter/sound identification. Teachers also reported that, overall, students were four to six weeks ahead in their learning from previous years.

WEST ALLIS-WEST MILWAUKEE

Shaping little learners with special needs

The West Allis-West Milwaukee School District is one of few local districts to offer 3K programming for children with physical, emotional, cognitive and learning differences.

In an effort to ease the transition to a traditional 4K environment, the district is piloting a new inclusion program this year – one that places special education students in the same classroom as general education students, with support. The 3K students visit a 4K buddy classroom daily alongside their teachers, therapists and assistants – starting with 30 or 40 minutes early in the year and slowly increasing to one or two hours.

All 3K classes are housed in Irving Elementary School, where onsite therapists (occupational, physical, speech, vision, hearing and more) provide necessary services in the classroom setting.

Keeping students with special needs with their same-age peers has them "blossoming" in language, social and play skills – and helps the kids in the 4K buddy classrooms, too, says Laura Womack, childhood diagnostician for the district. "At the age of 4, we're exposing our students to children that have all different abilities and needs and showing that they can engage and participate, maybe in a different way, alongside their peers," she says. ●