Creative Writing and Reading Program in Baltimore City School Gets Literature Off the Page and Into the Classroom

CityLit Project Pilots CityLit Kids at Govans Elementary School

BALTIMORE, MD—CityLit Project has launched a pilot program that brings creative writing and chapter-book reading into fourth-grade classrooms. CityLit Kids, which began in September 2010, is the first phase of a planned citywide program that builds enthusiasm for reading, expands writing skills, and encourages creative thought among elementary school students. The pilot will run through the 2010–2011 academic year in a fourth-grade classroom at Govans Elementary School off York Road in north Baltimore.

Weekly, one-hour classroom sessions include a trained volunteer-writer reading out loud from much-loved novels, participation in creative writing activities, and sharing work among students within the classroom. The read-aloud books are selected for age-appropriateness, but also for the right mix of substance and “kid appeal.” The journaling exercises, based on prompts that tie in with the reading, are intended to expose students to the fun of creative writing and the joy of sharing one’s work.

The program creators chose *The Tale of Despereaux*, *Bud, Not Buddy*, and other short works because of their universal appeal and their ability to inspire thoughtful reflection.

Periodically, guest writers accompany the regular volunteer to the classroom to read from their own work and discuss the life of a writer. For example, last fall children’s book author Margaret Musgrove shared her two illustrated books about African traditions. She also brought in samples of Kente cloth, statuary, and artifacts from her visits to Ghana. CityLit Kids participants were attentive, engaged, and inquisitive as cultural and historic lessons leaped from the page into their lives.

The program provides students with a journal and, at the end of the school year, a copy of one of the books they read during the program. Six months into the pilot, CityLit Kids creators noticed a significant improvement in students’ confidence in writing and their willingness to take creative risks. “This is my favorite part of the week,” said several students, who vie for turns to read their work aloud. Some students have begun to work on stories at home, as well.

Melanie Gray, the fourth grade teacher with whom program managers partner, remarked that students are writing much more now compared to the beginning of the year, and that many previously reluctant students now plunge into the writing activities.

The program was developed by the three Baltimore writers: Jane Delury, a University of Baltimore faculty member; Christine Grillo, a science writer and editor; and Elissa Weissman, a middle-grade novelist and CityLit Project board member. These founders currently manage the program, design the curriculum, and conduct the classroom activities. They plan to grow the program organically, perhaps partnering with the University of Baltimore’s MFA program in the near future.

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