

# When Learning Comes to Life

by Alexi Wilbourn

## It takes an imaginative teacher to ignite a passion for learning and make school fun.

Learning about the Periodic Table of Elements or the nation's legislative process can seem dull to many students, especially when they may have high-tech distractions within reach. But throughout the metro area, plenty of outstanding teachers are raising the bar to bring lessons to life in new and unusual ways.

Creativity in the classroom comes in many forms, but there are some common ingredients. Student interaction and hands-on activities are key elements.

Instead of being lectured to, students are asked to find answers by doing. Instead of a teacher just giving information and answers, lessons are injected with new life when teacher and students approach a topic creatively, share thoughts and perspectives, and everyone asks questions along the way.

Here's just a sampling of many lessons and subjects being brought to invigorating life in metro Atlanta classrooms.



Milton High School

### **Cirque Program, Milton High School**

Drama teacher Larry Smith is a creative powerhouse at Fulton County's Milton High. He's always thinking about what he can do next in his production class. The "Cirque program," which takes inspiration from Cirque Du Soleil, teaches kids the many aspects that go into creating a professional stage production. Other schools also have variations of this program. Students create a story that will be told through physical activity, rather than words.

The kids, grades 9-12, get assignments throughout the year. They conceptualize and create routines, and they end each Cirque program with a final performance. The class starts with an audition process during the spring for students hoping to enter the program in the next academic year. Students try their hand at different apparatuses – ropes, hoops, poles and more – and show their potential. "Mostly, we look for a willing spirit," Smith says of the auditions.

Now in its third year, there are 54 students in the class. The students learn acrobatics, tightrope walking, trapeze artistry and other circus-like skills. Smith uses his creative juices to come up with new acts and storylines and to find ways to teach and encourage his students to push themselves beyond what they think they are capable of doing to reach their true potential.

The physical demands of the activities benefit the students in one way, but Smith also likes the fact that his students improve their self-esteem and learn the value of teamwork.

### **Ellis Island Day, East Side Elementary School**

"Creativity is very important to me, due to its power to spark the interest of a child," says Liz Woods, who now teaches fifth grade at East Cobb's East Side Elementary, where she previously taught fourth grade for a number of years. "Kids don't realize they are learning when they are having fun!"

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The entire fifth grade recently took part in an Ellis Island simulation at the school to align with their curriculum on studying immigration. Students walked the walk and talked the talk. They all received roles to play, complete with foreign names, countries and personal profiles, and dressed up as immigrants. The school was transformed into Ellis Island, with a gender-specific medical examination room, legal inquiry rooms, money exchange counter, intelligence testing stations and a baggage room.

With handmade passports hanging from their necks, the fifth-graders shuffled from station to station to gain a sense of what the Ellis Island immigrants might have gone through. They attempted to pass interrogations and exchanged foreign currency for American dollars. Some were even "robbed" by the inspectors. After completing the stations, the students lined up outside to pledge their American citizenship. "But if they had an X on their passport, the kids were pulled aside to be deported," Wood says, chuckling about the kids who teared up at their pretend fate.

Each class discussed the events of their Ellis Island day, relating it back to the immigrants and expressing their own feelings and perspectives. "A lot of kids hear about Ellis Island and talk about it," Wood says. "But this will be a lesson they'll hold with them forever."

## Native American Museum, Conley Hills Elementary

In honor of Native American Heritage Month (November), fourth graders in the gifted program at Conley Hills Elementary transformed an empty classroom into a Native American history museum for their



East Side Elementary School

school. The class of 10 students used money from an Elmer's Glue Grant to design their museum around four regions: the Arctic, the Southwest, the Plains and the Woodlands.

But what's a museum without displays? Inspired by real artifacts shown to the students by the Atlanta History Center, the kids crafted indigenous "carvings," dioramas, food items and games over the next nine weeks. "Part of the curriculum is learning how Native Americans survived in nature, so the kids actually made things to use like the Native Americans would have

done," says Kristin Siembieda, a fourth-grade gifted teacher.

The fourth-graders even gave guided tours to other students in the school, where younger children had the chance to crawl inside the tee-pee and inflatable igloo that grant funds paid for. The museum remained open through December.

"I've had these kids since they were in first grade and they said this was by far their favorite unit," Siembieda says.

## Planting the Seeds for a Smarter, Healthier Life, Tucker Middle School

Grow a garden and you'll harvest more than the produce. Students' test scores also will grow.

"I wanted to find outlets to inspire children to learn," says sixth-grade earth science teacher Tim Ryan, who directs Tucker's new gardening program. "I read an article that showed gardening could improve learning and test scores and I thought, 'Look at how the scores increase when they participate in a seed-to-table program!'"

Ryan gathered statistics linking student learning with raising a garden and persuaded the school's principal and teachers to give it a try. One stat: Seventh-grade students who participated at the University of Georgia Experiment Station Research and Education Garden at Griffin, Ga., raised their mean test scores in math by 10 points and in science by 15 points within a one-year period.

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Tucker Middle School

Tucker Middle School's garden, started in September with the help of the Live Healthy & Thrive Youth Foundation's "Gardens Are for Kids" program, has five raised beds and 60 gardeners actively involved in maintaining the plots. By year's end, Ryan hopes to expand to 15 raised beds – making it the largest school garden in Georgia – and expects to get more students actively involved in "Gardenerds," the school's garden club.

The kids meet daily from 8:30-9:45 a.m. to tend the garden. In the process, they learn about ecology, insects, birds, math, science and healthy eating habits.

So far, they've grown – and consumed – winter vegetables such as beets, kale, turnips, collards and lettuce.

"I made a salad and added some tomatoes and cucumbers," Ryan says. At a school where 70 percent of students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program, "some of the kids had never had tomatoes and cucumbers in their lives."

The kids asked for Thousand Island, Ranch or French dressing, but Ryan was



Sophia Academy

ready with oil and vinegar, lemon wedges and a lesson in healthy choices. "The kids were amazed that something they grew they were eating, and that it tasted so good," Ryan says. "A lot of our students are economically disadvantaged and gardening helps those kids the most."

"Gardens Are for Kids" has plans to expand into Atlanta Public Schools in the fall.

## Holocaust Trunk, Sophia Academy

After receiving an invitation from the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust to participate in a special project, Sophia Academy was given two trunks to be decorated by the fifth graders and middle school students. The trunks would then be filled with educational materials about the Holocaust to be circulated to other classes around the state.

Determined to make the project a positive one, fine arts director Tracey Buot facilitated class discussions to get at the heart of what the students wanted to accomplish. The recurring theme was one of faith, tolerance and respect.

The middle school students used gold and black paint on their trunk to represent hope and a memorial tone, respectively. They used decoupage to display images that encouraged tolerance for all races and faiths.

Kathy Bevington, a fifth-grade teacher, adds that the Holocaust trunk provided a unique opportunity to combine art, social studies and character education into one project.

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Although the six-week project focused on such a tragic event, Buot had total faith that her students would do an excellent job: "Too many times, parents and teachers think kids can't understand a serious topic or don't have the maturity needed for it, but they can. If you give a student a high expectation they'll meet it, and they'll meet it every time."

## Creative Chemistry, Mount Paran High School

It's easy to understand why students love Brad Smith's chemistry class at Mount Paran. Smith believes that the best teachers have to be entertainers. Smith wants his class to be engaged in learning: "I don't want to be bored and I don't want to bore my students."

Smith integrates music and technology into everything he does, believing he will engage students on any number of levels. He teaches a criminalistics class in which students gather evidence after shattering glass, splattering fake blood and hearing



Mount Paran High School

from a host of guest speakers. The kids learn their science in ways that they can relate to and have most likely seen on TV shows such as *CSI: Las Vegas*.

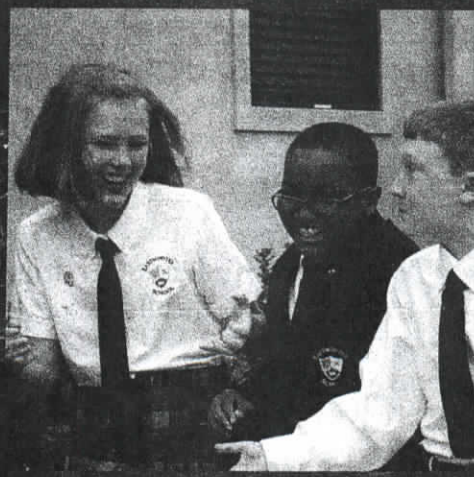
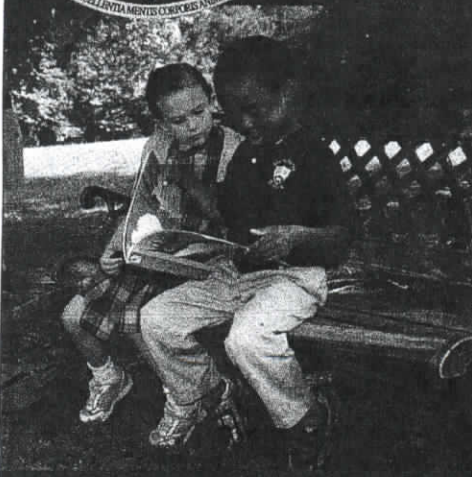
This science department head is known to match certain soundtracks with specific chemistry lessons. One of his most famous

examples is his lab on chemical reactions, when he lights his hand on fire while playing "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash. Needless to say, this chemistry teacher sometimes has a few things to explain when a prospective student and parent pop in unexpectedly during a school tour.



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