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Community Connections



Students check out baby chicks at a local farm.

By Teresa Di Ninno and
Jeney Gordon, CAPE Public
Charter School

The Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence's (CAPE) program is grounded in a partnership between parents, staff and community. As such, CAPE's learning environment reaches into the community, building relationships which are not only conducive to student engagement, but also foster a sense of belonging and of citizenry. These relationships promote life-long learning, global-ethical citizenry and the entrepreneurial spirit.

They also support a culture of collaboration and develop student knowledge of the community. Competencies increase as students engage within their community; noting its strengths and weaknesses and ways they may contribute. Students become integral members of the community and can thus support their community for the benefit of all its citizens.

Interactions with community role models allow for learner-mentor relationships to develop. These role models provide experiences that support successful engagement. From kindergarten through Grade 9, these experiences increase in complexity and scope. Not only do our children and students venture

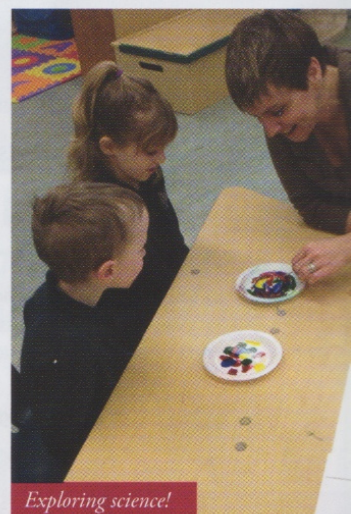
Student success soars when strong partnerships are built with the community.



Students, parents and staff participate in multi-cultural day.



Students hone their chef skills making pizza.



Exploring science!

The children are exposed to activities that build appreciation of the arts. The passion and enthusiasm that artists, actors, and musicians share with the children, help develop a desire to learn more about art, drama and music.

into the community but community members also come into our classrooms regularly.

Even though kindergarten is not a mandatory program, nor is it intended to be full-time, CAPE believes that learning at the kindergarten level is the foundation for success in the elementary years. Therefore, our kindergarten program is delivered full-days, every day. Community exposure for preschoolers focuses on the provision of basic needs through hands-on, experiential activities. The benefit of on-site learning is the authenticity it brings.

Our kindergarten children interact with members of our farming community, our city services, safety programs, grocery stores and physicians, among others. For example, children learn where their food comes from, which foods come from other parts of the

world, how to make healthy food choices and how food costs different amounts. Children learn how to play safely, whose job it is to keep them safe, who will help them if they don't feel safe and who will assist them if they become injured.

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In early elementary the experiences from kindergarten expand to include a historic component. In our history-rich community there are multiple sites where students can learn about the past; from the historic clay district, to heritage homes, to the Esplanade archives. By studying the various parks in

the community, and viewing commemorative sculptures and monuments, the students learn about historical events and people. Members of historical societies visit the school and enrich the learning.

At this division level, exposure to groups that support science begins. Through the direct involvement of organizations such as PRAXIS, and a plethora of members of the scientific community, the learning is hands-on, experimental and open-ended.

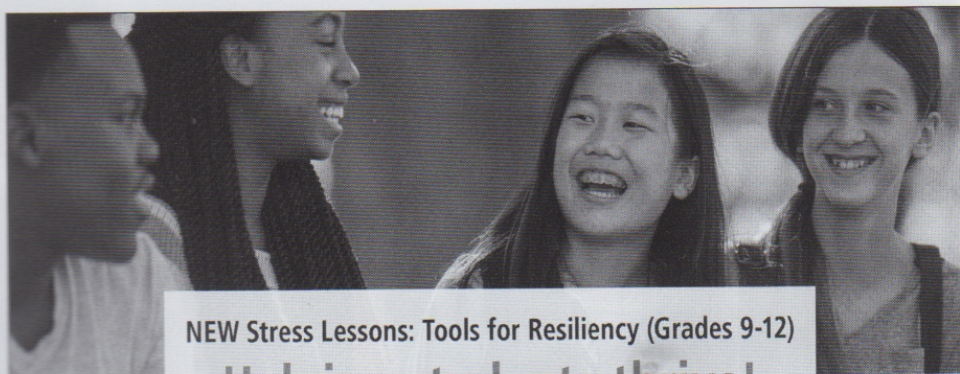
The upper elementary students gain a broader exposure of the community and its complex issues. Local political systems are viewed through the eyes of taxpayers, counsellors and the mayor. Students visit local political sites including the city hall theatre. They interact with local elected officials both inside and outside of the school. Our students invite candidates during election times to hear the various platforms and ask questions about important issues. Mock elections are conducted with support from local sources and Elections Canada.

Multiculturalism is another big idea which links our students with the community. By interacting purposefully with people from other parts of the world the students learn about other cultures.

As students prepare their mandatory science fair projects they are mentored by individuals within our scientific community. During Heritage Fair members of historic communities, parents and archivists offer regular input from historic perspectives by mentoring students in their area of expertise. Other individuals come into our classes to promote public speaking skills and assist students in refining their presentations.

In junior high the community engagement is not as pre-planned as in the younger grades. Rather, students initiate community connections and indicate areas of interest within the community. There is a distinct interest in financial literacy and business and so banking organizations and Junior Achievement are frequent presenters. In addition, students request repeat visits from artists and musicians as well as police officers and physicians, to increase their awareness and skills within chosen projects.

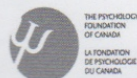
As students move through the grades they gain a great deal of exposure to the community and thus show interest in contributing through volunteerism. Students have been recognized for their volunteer efforts as Leaders of Tomorrow, Peace Week medallion



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recipients, workers with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), cadets and more.

Within the contexts of Science Fair and Heritage Fair, students actively look for mentors within the community and engage in interviews and online learning to benefit their unique projects and interests. The student connections to community also expand past our civic boundaries as students attend regional, provincial and national competitions and events. Our school is regularly represented at national science fairs, national Young Citizens forums and international online contests.

Personal initiatives, not necessarily tied to our school, such as dancing with the Toronto ballet, fitness and skills competitions and international historic travel, also become more prominent.

While some activities are planned to enhance grade-specific curriculum, other activities are developed to enhance the school as a whole. One key component of our school is technology. One-on-one computing has been an element of our program since the school's inception in 1994. Guests that bring expertise with word processing, design,

presentation, animation and programming visit regularly and have offered after-school clubs for interested students.

Annually, our school selects three charities to support through student initiatives; one local, one provincial and one global. One of our annual local charity collections was started by Uzair, a student council president with a desire to "leave a legacy." Students work tirelessly to meet the needs of our community food bank and women's shelter, and by "Stacking the Sleigh" with much-needed, donated items.

Our students eagerly become involved with activities in support of the wider Canadian community. Jump Rope for Heart, walking for MS, running for Terry Fox, donning moustaches for Movember and cutting hair for cancer are only a few examples.

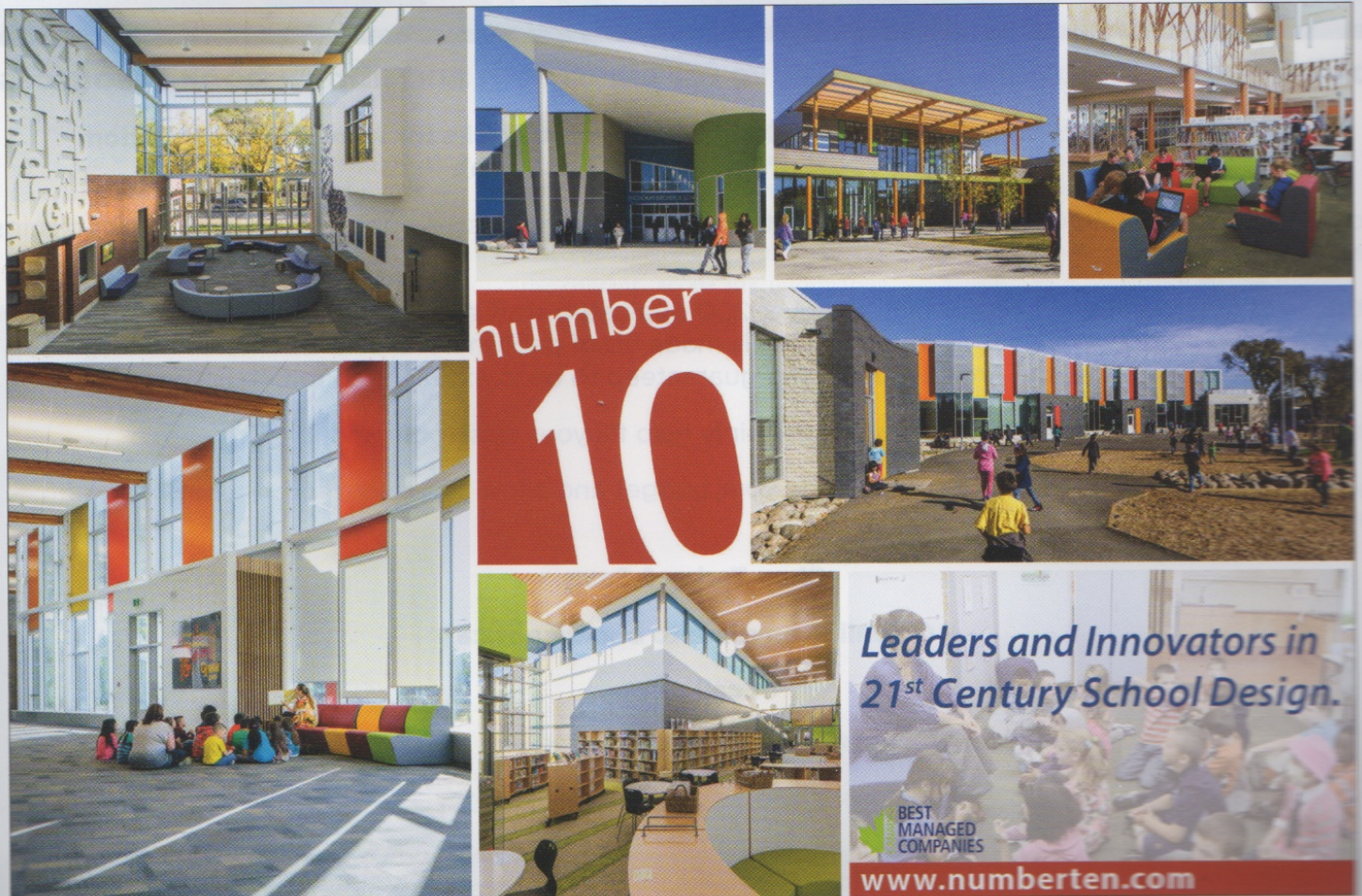
Bi-annually, the school becomes a flurry of activity in preparation for the school-wide drama production. Choreographers, speech coaches, Bollywood teachers, sound and light techs, photographers and designers of sets and costumes, expose the students to a wide array of skill sets needed to present a memorable play.

As one of our three program supports, the community connections are a vital

component to CAPE's uniqueness. On an annual basis, support from close to 150 community individuals and organizations, enriches and expands the learning for our students. Extremely high satisfaction rates on our annual teacher, student and parent surveys are indicators of the effectiveness of our community partnerships. The experiences our community partners offer our students, directly supports the Ministerial Order on Student Learning and competency building, and are instrumental in the development of the whole child. ○

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