

TEACHING TEACHERS

Benchmark Welcomes Aspiring Teachers into the Classroom

by Debbie Murray

Benchmark School and West Chester University (WCU) have a unique and long-standing partnership. For more than 20 years, students aspiring to become teachers have been invited into Benchmark's classrooms for a reading practicum during the school's summer camp language arts program. For the first time this year, the program was expanded to include a practicum placement during the spring semester.

Dr. Eleanor Gensemer, Head of the Middle School, explained the new addition. "The state requires four levels of field experience. This reading practicum is a level three which is completed just before student teaching. When the state changed the certification to an early grades and a middle grades certification, finding places for students interested in the middle grades became an issue for universities."

Eleanor Gensemer works with Dr. Sunita Mayor, Chair of West Chester University's Department of Literacy, to coordinate the program. Dr. Mayor said she was intrigued by the arrangement between the two schools when she interviewed for her position 14 years



Tim Parker so enjoyed his Benchmark practicum that he stayed to teach in the summer program.



West Chester University practicum student Lindsay Dietz reviews a student's writing assignment.

ago. "I asked the then-Chair of the department about Benchmark School because I had read about it [in education journals] and was curious about the program. I wanted to be a part of it and she was wonderful to allow me to take it on. I've been very fortunate that Benchmark has allowed us to come back year after year."

The spring and summer programs are formatted slightly differently. In the spring, West Chester students are assigned to lower or middle school classrooms two days a week from February through May. The summer program is five days a week for five weeks.

"It's a reading practicum which means that students come to the class with the expectation of learning reading strategies and more about language arts instruction," Dr. Mayor explained. "They all come away with a really strong understanding of strategy instruction and what it means to help students to become independent learners. They learn reading strategies, vocabulary strategies, and all of the content reading instruction and writing instruction. They learn that it is not just about teaching children the content, but the importance of learning how to learn. That is what is powerful about Benchmark School. It is that focus on learning how to learn and helping students become independent learners."

Lindsay Dietz, now a WCU senior and a middle grades Math and Special Ed double major, participated in the spring practicum. "It's been such a great experience because Benchmark is such a different classroom dynamic than what I usually see in the field," she said. "It's new for me to work on some kind of reading and writing all morning with students. It's very unusual for me to see three teachers in a classroom of 12 children. At first, I thought I'd be in the way of the other teachers. Then I quickly realized that this one-on-one attention really helps these students."

Lindsay said that on the first day she was asked, "What do you want to be doing? Here are lesson plans if you are comfortable doing that. If you want to sit and observe that's fine too." She was able to

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jump right in and be a part of the classroom. “I taught book-sharing and small reading groups. I worked with students individually to help them with reading response. You can tell that the children really enjoy what they are doing. If you asked a child in a general education fourth grade classroom to pick out a book and then tell their partner about it, they would not be excited. It was really cool to see. I got so much hands-on experience at Benchmark that I don’t think I would get anywhere else,” Lindsay commented.

“Everyone was welcoming,” she added. “I’ve been in classrooms where the teachers are simply accommodating. The Benchmark faculty treated me as if they wanted to help me with my education. I heard, ‘How can I help you?’ ‘Here are some ideas about your lesson,’ and ‘This is what you did well and this is something you can fix.’ Getting that kind of feedback is invaluable.”

WCU senior Tim Parker participated in the spring practicum in the middle school and enjoyed the experience so much he quickly applied for a summer assistant teaching position and was hired. “Math and history are my concentrations, but now I wish I had focused on Special Ed after spending time at Benchmark,” Tim said. “I’m impressed with how the teachers go the extra mile here.”

Spring and summer have been like night and day for Tim. During the spring practicum he observed, taught a number of lessons, and shadowed a student. He saw only a half an hour of language arts and spent the rest of



The 15 students who participated in the spring reading practicum at Benchmark are pictured with Dr. Sunita Mayor, Chair of the university’s Department of Literacy (third row, center).

his time working with students on social studies or science. “We were very hands-on in the classroom,” he noted. “After we taught a lesson we would get feedback from the teachers and the students, which was very helpful.”

This summer, Tim has gone from student to teacher and the focus is language arts. He is partnered with Megan Wonderland, a middle school classroom teacher with 15 years of experience teaching at Benchmark.

“I’m doing more in the classroom,” Tim noted. “Ms. Wonderland takes half of the class for an activity and I take the other half. For example, I am doing individual reading responses. Students read a book and they have to answer questions in complete sentences. So I go from student to student to check their progress, review all of the good grammar techniques, and make sure they are completing the sentences. I like the one-on-one instruction. It is so different from classrooms I am familiar with where a student turns a paper in, gets red marks on a paper, and is never shown how to correct the mistakes. Our Benchmark students get direct feedback right away. I think that is so important.”

He was also surprised at how eager the students are to learn. “You would think that the kids wouldn’t want to go to school in the summer, but there is no pulling teeth here. They want to learn and improve their skills.”

Tim is grateful to be working with Megan Wonderland. “She is a tremendous teacher with a great deal of experience. If I have a question, she has an answer. She knows what needs to be done. It’s awesome to have someone like that to learn from and fall back on.”

“This experience is something that they will take away with them and have forever,” Sunita Mayor said. “They will know what it means to teach children strategies, such as decoding strategies, comprehension strategies, and specific comprehension strategies for the narrative. Our West Chester students get a really good understanding of what it means to learn strategies for reading and strategies for learning. They all walk away with a really ‘wow’ experience and say it was well worth their time!”

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