

Drama adds a new twist in learning for Spanish-speaking students

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COLLINSVILLE — After warming up their bodies and doing an imagination exercise that turned a paint stirrer into a toothbrush, baseball bat and telephone, the students at Kreitner Elementary School pretend to be sloths in the rainforest.

They move as slowly as possible around the classroom, crouching under desks to recorder music. Then they become caterpillars, using long strips of paper as mouthparts and antennae.

"Let's hear some good chewing sounds!" says Roxane McWilliams, an educator with the Metro Theater Company.

The scene is part of a collaboration that has placed Metro members like McWilliams in the school for a semester-long residency. Such partnerships seek to use the arts to trigger imagination, with drama providing a springboard to learning.

But the program at Kreitner also has a more fundamental goal: helping students who are learning English for the first time.

Elizabeth Baumgartner, a first-grade teacher at Kreitner, says several of the students spoke no English when classes started last fall. Many of the students are conversant in English but have trouble with vocabulary.

Emily Kohring, education director for the Metro Theater Company, said Kreitner was selected for the program because of its location and its demographics. The school draws many of its students from nearby Fairmont City, which has a majority Hispanic population, according to U.S. Census data. At Kreitner, nearly two-thirds of students are Hispanic.

Kohring says that theater and creative movement help kids pick up language skills in ways that common classroom activities would not.

"The way that drama helps is that you use your body, your voice, your imagination," she said. "If you don't have the voice part because you don't have the words yet, your body can really help you. Acting, in a kinesthetic way, can help kids learning vocabulary."

The program began this semester and is funded by a grant from the Monsanto Fund. The residency includes classes for the first and second grades, schoolwide performances and workshops for teachers, culminating with a family celebration later this month.

McWilliams said the students have taken on a variety of projects. They have written letters to people who worked in the building, learned about rhyme and used pantomime to bring poems to life.

Vicky Reulecke, principal of Kreitner, said the program is getting results.

"We're seeing kids feel more empowered to take academic risks and share their feelings," she said.

Every session features opportunities for students to use new English words.

In a classroom, first-graders sit in a circle on the floor. Led by McWilliams, the students start by making "put-ups," complimenting their classmates on what they have done well in the classroom.

"What does Gustavo do well?" McWilliams asks. "Is he a good friend?"

"Yes!"

Another student is complimented on her hairstyle and how quietly she sits in the circle.

Estefhania Perez is now commenting on another student's "put-up." Baumgartner said Estefhania started speaking English a few months ago.

Kohring says that kind of progress and positive feedback from teachers make the program worthwhile. "My favorite thing is a teacher will tell me, 'I've never seen that student talk or express themselves,'" she said.

Amy Dunn, a Metro Theater Company teacher working with second-graders, says

theater and creative movement give students the opportunity to find English words they might not use in the classroom. For example, the list of words for emotions has been growing all semester.

"We go around in a circle and say, 'how do you feel today?' They use words that aren't on the list or ask to put new words on the list," Dunn said. "When I come in now, the excitement of 'what are we going to do next' is really palpable."

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