

Students Enjoying Discovery Center Experience

by Chris Seymour

Not quite two years ago, the Board of Education decided to switch from one 5th grade outdoor educational experience—Nature's Classroom—to another with more of a focus on diversity.

The change to the new program, the Discovery Center, located in Woodstock, CT, brought parents out in droves to express worries, concerns and criticisms about the switch.

Last Monday night, however, the Board of Education (BOE) heard from a different constituency—three 5th grade students who recently attended the overnight portion of the Discovery Center program with their school's urban partner school—who spoke in glowing terms of their experience.

"I thought it was a great experience to get to know the students from Maria Sanchez," said Eastbury 5th grader Nicholas Bremmer of his experience with the Hartford elementary school. "We exchanged lots of questions and realized we had a lot in common, even though we live in different areas."

Nicholas said he hopes the program continues. "I think this program is great because it allows students the chance to make new friends. I hope this program will continue and every student will learn as much as I did," he said.

The decision by the Board of Education to switch programs in March 2008 created a storm of controversy, as parents pleaded for the return to the popular Nature's Classroom.

Some parents were critical of the process that led to the change; expressed disappointment that the popular outdoor program will no longer be offered; and cautiously voiced concerns about the Discovery Center's sister school aspect, which pairs suburban schools with urban partner schools.

The BOE stuck to its decision, saying the new program was cheaper and offered more flexibility for Glastonbury in terms of curricu-

lum.

One of the more controversial aspects of the program was the overnight stay. In order to assist in the transition from one program to another, the BOE decided to forgo the overnight portion of the trip for Glastonbury's six elementary schools and their partners in 2008-09 and begin that in 2009-10.

As a result, 5th graders from Naubuc, Nayaug and Eastbury recently attended the Discovery Center overnight trip with their partner schools. Naubuc partnered with Batchelder School in Hartford, Eastbury with Sanchez School in Hartford and Nayaug attended with O'Connell School from East Hartford.

Nayaug 5th grader Emily Whittles said she also had a positive experience at the Discovery Center. "I definitely thought the Discovery Center was fun; I had a great time," she said.

One of her favorite activities was the campfire. "On the night of the campfire, it rained but we still had it inside anyway. We sang songs all night and we made s'mores in front of the indoor fireplace—the s'mores were so good!" said Emily.

Emily Bennett of Naubuc School also said she had a great time. "I enjoyed sleeping overnight more than I thought I would because everybody I knew was there and that made it feel like it was just a huge sleepover!" said Emily.

She also enjoyed the way the food was served. "I also liked that they served the food family style, because then we had to say things like 'please pass the potatoes,'" added Emily.

Emily also said she learned that she and her classmates are a lot like the students from their partner school. "We thought we were so different, but it turns out we're a lot alike," she observed.

In addition to the students, administrators spoke about the positive experiences on the trips, which went well by all accounts.

"All three schools had an extremely positive and successful experience," said Kitching. "The addition of the partner schools this year allowed

for a richer diversity program, one our students handled well. The reports from students and staff were extremely positive," he added.

Teachers reported that students were impressive in their insight and were filled with many fond memories after the trips, according to Kitching.

Nayaug Principal Dr. Holly Hageman said her students gave great feedback. "When I exit interviewed all the 5th grade classes about what they liked, what they would like to see put into action—there was just a resounding positive response from the kids," she said.

Buttonball Lane School was unable to attend this fall as scheduled with partner school Jefferson Elementary in New Britain because of an outbreak of the flu among Buttonball students. According to Kitching, Jefferson was willing to postpone its trip so the two schools can go together in early June.