

Brain food: Teacher Fay Stone helps her fourth-grade class at William Grace Elementary get their hands into their classwork, making relief maps of Michigan.



Gelatin helps mold students with science

Editor's note: This story marks another installment of *Today's Lesson*, a series that chronicles classroom activities in Farmington Public Schools.

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Talk about food for thought. When William Grace Elementary School fourth-grade teacher Fay Stone scooped out flat squares of green gelatin with grapes on top for students last week, it had nothing to do with snack time.

The squiggly dessert, instead, represented a sweet way to learn about the human cell. Students were permitted to consume the squares, but only after completing a workbook assignment about cells.

Before it was "Jell-O" time, however, Stone, using a computer for visual help, instructed students about components of a cell — outer membrane, cytoplasm and nucleus.

"Cells need liquid to survive," explained Stone to one group of six students. "What would happen to your body if it were only liquid?"

While discussing cytoplasm, Stone emphasized that although it is water, "It's not like the water that comes out of the Detroit River and comes out of the faucet. It's not that kind of water. It's

liquid, it's sticky."

After dishing out the gelatin squares to that group, Stone continued encouraging students to think first, eat second.



"I want you to look at this and touch the membrane," she said. "Tell me what the different parts are."

Quicker than it takes for gelatin to turn from liquid to solid, students came through with answers: The part that can be touched represented the membrane; everything inside was the cytoplasm; and the grape, of course, provided a perfect way to illustrate the nucleus.

"Jell-O is clear, cells are clear," said Stone about why that particular food was chosen for the lesson. "Jell-O has a membrane and kids see that membrane form. We made it today from a liquid. There was no reason for having grapes as the nucleus ... It could have been anything."

Stone, a former Detroit teacher hired at the start of the school year to address overcrowding in the fourth grade at Grace, said the gelatin-as-cells exercise is another example of the sensory learning she advocates.

"We're hitting all the senses," Stone said. "I have found, when you mix food and a concept to teach, it reinforces that

concept. It involves more than one sense — touch, smell, taste."

She said that's an unforgettable way to retain a lesson, much more than if it was taught straight out of a textbook.

Students had some varied and interesting responses when asked what they thought the "cell membrane" was on a human.

"I think it's the stomach," said 9-year-old Corey Wilson. "Because it holds all the stuff inside."

"I put the brain, but I don't think it's right," said Jonathan Williams, 9.

Asia Hassan, 9, said "Your skin, because it protects the inside of your body."

Meanwhile, the cells-gelatin comparison occupied only part of the class at a time. In Stone's class, the 21 students are broken up into small groups and revolve from learning station to station.

Some sat at their desks and did math assignments. Others worked with professional Betty Bemis as they par-

layed flour, water and salt into topographical maps of Michigan. Those ingredients were kneaded into a sticky dough-like substance and packed onto a sheet of paper that happened to represent a map of the state.

The trick was to stay inside the lines of the drawings, with students such as 10-year-old Ryan Urbank and 9-year-old Kanth Avula adding more dough to the portions of Michigan that have higher elevation, such as the western Upper Peninsula.

Because Ryan has a physical handicap, Bemis helped him on the project.

"They'll represent the inland lakes with paint," noted Bemis, a 10-year veteran at Grace.

According to Kanth, the unique topographical map was a fun way to learn about the history and climate of Michigan. "I think it's fun to do all the projects that Miss Stone has for us."

Stone, who has about 20 years of teaching experience, explained her

Hands on: "It's gross," according to Jennifer Smith, at left, as she squashes a mixture of flour, salt, and water in her hands to make a clay that will be molded into hills to make a relief map of Michigan. Below, Jacquelyn Demers (left) and Kristina Schultz eat the tasty lime Jell-O that was used in class to help teach about cells.



STAFF PHOTOS BY BRIAN MITCHELL



instructional philosophy.

"Kids have to learn by hands-on and experiences," she said, looking over at the map-making station. "... Seeing that on a regular map, they're experiencing what elevation really is."

The activities also teach important life skills, such as teamwork and problem-solving.

"These kids need to experience how to get along with one another," Stone said. "When there's conflict, what do we do?"

Teacher review process shifts

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Teacher evaluation used to mean little more than hit or miss. A principal might sit in on an hour or two of class time, scribbling notes about how well the faculty member delivered curriculum to students.

If the teacher wasn't having a particularly productive day, his or her future could be seriously impacted merely by what the principal jotted down.

"They'd give you a gold star if you did well," said Jerry Fouchey, director of curriculum and staff development.

Those days apparently will soon be long gone in Farmington Public Schools.

As part of a new process being phased in over the next three years, it's all about goal setting, teamwork, administrators and teachers deciding the best course of action. Teacher evaluation is a key component of the comprehensive report received last week by the school board, "Toward a Cycle of Continuous Improvement," which was sparked by the goals of Mission 2007.

The new system, more than two years in the making, recasts more than evaluations. It also delves into what characteristics the district looks for when hiring teachers as well as how technology can help pinpoint a search for teaching candidates.

Presenters at the board meeting were Fouchey, Assistant Superintendent Sue Zurvalet, Executive Director of Personnel Services Larry Lobert. Included in the process was the Farmington Education Association, which recently negotiated with the district to establish the parameters for teaching screening, evaluation

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Tom Chrzanowski
—FEA president

tion and staff development.

School officials were responsive to the multi-faceted plan.

"The harsh reality is having 2,000, 4,000 applications on file and (not be) positive who were candidates for high school physics or fourth grade general education," said Superintendent Bob Maxfield. "Now you have a database and you can pull (information about) candidates on the screen and see only those applicants who are really interested in a position."

Augmenting the report is a 10-minute video put together for faculty members across the district to view for awareness-building purposes. FEA President Tom Chrzanowski, Harrison High School Teacher Bill Clair and Warner Middle School Principal Darlene Russell are among the panelists on the video.

"The old (teacher evaluation method) was designed for 2 percent of our staff," said Chrzanowski in the video. "Those were really the ones in trouble, who lacked certain skills they needed to have to be successful."

"I thought we tried to fit the other 98 percent into that evaluation system and it wasn't working. It wasn't meaningful. So we wanted a more meaningful system, where teachers would have a chance for input."

Clair said the new method — to be piloted next year at four yet-

to-be-determined schools — should make teachers feel more at ease, both with their bosses and in front of students, because he or she is involved in the process. "It should be something all teachers should feel comfortable with, because it's what they've been doing."

Warner's Russell said principals will lose some of their authority under the process. But the result should be worth it.

"This gives me a chance to know my teacher, a chance to talk and celebrate the successes with these teachers," Russell said. "Is it time consuming? Yeah it is. But it's valuable time, because you do grow together ..."

"We gave up some of our leadership because the teacher takes on some of that leadership role. But in time, both sides learn. And that's really the crucial point."

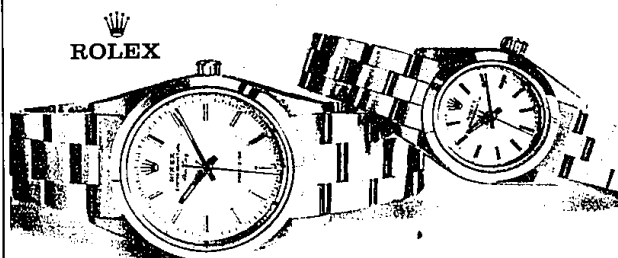
Fouchey noted that new teachers hired in recent years are already being evaluated in such a collaborative way, with annual reviews for each of the first four years of an individual's career. Tenured faculty members are evaluated once every three years.

During the school board meeting, Trustee Bobbie Feldman complimented the program. "This process goes a long way toward increasing the professional respect of what a teacher should be. I can't imagine a business or corporation having a more thorough hiring process."

The new process follows stringent guidelines established by the American Association of School Personnel Administrators, Fouchey said.

"The new process is about knowing your job, knowing what good teaching is," summed up Fouchey.

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2 rob gas station at 9 Mile/Farmington

Farmington Hills police are looking for leads after a pair of thieves held up a Shell gas station Sunday.

At 5:15 p.m., two men went inside the Farmington Express Shell station on Farmington Road, near Nine Mile, and appeared to be looking at separate displays. One of the men

approached the 27-year-old clerk from behind and put what was believed to be a gun to the back of his head.

The clerk was told to open the register. After taking the money — believed to be \$2,000 — both men drove away on eastbound Nine Mile in a brown-colored vehicle.

The robber is described as a black man 6-foot tall and weighing around 200 pounds. He was wearing a brown jacket, black T-shirt and black and red colored cap.

His accomplice is also believed to be a black male, about 5-foot-8 and wearing jeans and a dark puffy-type jacket.