



## Signature Practice 2 Narrative

### Centers

#### 1. Rationale/Basis of the Practice

Dinosaurs, Ceramics, Chinese Culture/Mandarin, and Cooking. Do you know what these topics have in common? They're all Centers at Village School!

Village School believes that a hands-on, dynamic curriculum brings students to their highest level and helps them attain the necessary skills needed to meet yearly goals. We believe that an enriched curriculum, teaching to the whole child, motivates students to become engaged in their learning, thus fostering a love of learning. Establishing a culture that values this love of learning, where students gain knowledge collaboratively, partake in educational activities, and apply their understanding to other situations, is crucial to helping students become independent learners. Creating a sense of excitement about learning is of the utmost importance.

Centers is a signature enrichment practice that is a cornerstone at Village School. Our Centers program is experienced by every child at Village, every year, K-5th grade. Centers are like college electives, giving students the chance to sample numerous, interesting topics they might not otherwise experience that may lead to interests, explorations, and pursuits they didn't know possible.

Each of our Center courses is a carefully-crafted, standards-based, 4- or 6-week module of curriculum, planned by a team of volunteer parents and an advisory teacher, then taught by trained parents. Centers teach such things as nutrition, measurement, equivalencies, and chemistry (Cooking Center), physics (Roller Coaster Design Center), social science (Pioneer Days Center), and performing arts (Drama Center) as well as many, many other concepts and skills.

The success of Centers, which has been part of the Village curriculum since its days as a 2-room school in the 1990's, is dependent upon the cooperation of every single one of our 11 teachers, at least 72 parent volunteers, and our PTA, which funds program supplies (\$4,900 is budgeted for the year 2013-2014). Working together, parents, teachers, and the students themselves, collaborate to create the community framework that makes Centers a reality.

Our Centers offer authentic, challenging curriculum and give students choice in their pursuit of new knowledge. Both enrichment and differentiation are present. Children learn in different ways and at different speeds, and Centers allow children to experience new topics, with supporting adults, and kids of various grade levels.

#### 2. Description of the Practice

Students rotate through Centers grouped with 8 or 9 other students in K-2nd grade groupings (Lower Grade Centers) or 3rd-5th grade groupings (Upper Grade Centers). At the end of each Center rotation, students begin another Center, regrouped with a new mix of students. Students build community as they progress through the Centers. They also meet a myriad of adult instructors enthusiastic about their topic. Students exit each Center with exposure to, and a better understanding, of the subject matter, as well as new friends, cross-grade-level relationships, and interactions with adults possessing many talents.

Centers are held on Monday and Tuesday afternoons for Lower Grades (K-2) and on Thursday and Friday afternoons for Upper Grades (3-5). All students attend one of the two days of Centers for their grade level. Each Center lesson is 45 minutes. The students rotate through each Center for either 4 weeks (Lower Grade) or 6 weeks (Upper Grade). There are 8 Lower Grade Centers and each student will attend 7 of these by the end of the year. There are 8 Upper Grade Centers and each student will attend 5 or 6 of these by the end of the year. Students receive a questionnaire prior to each Center rotation and get to request which Center they would prefer to do next.

Planning each year's Centers actually starts the previous school year. Center topics are identified and chosen by the PTA Enrichment Chair, a Center Supervisor (parent volunteer) for Lower Grade Centers, a Center Supervisor (parent volunteer) for Upper Grade Centers and Teacher Advisors. Over the summer, this Center team recruits Center Leads (additional parent volunteers) to teach the various Center topics and together the Center Supervisors, Center Leads and Teacher Advisors plan the curriculum for each Center to meet the needs of the standards and the school. Simultaneously, the Center Supervisors meet with the PTA Treasurer to set the budget.

As the school year nears, an additional parent volunteer for each Center is recruited so that each Center, each day, will be taught by two parent volunteers - the Center Lead (who helped plan the curriculum over the summer) as well as a Parent Assistant (who will assist with the Center during the school year). All Center parents are then trained prior to the start of Centers, which begin at the end of September. Training is a critical component, as this is what ensures the success of our program.

Recent Enrichment Center offerings include Cooking, Ancient Egypt, Photography, Post Office, Techno/Journalism, Mandarin, Dinosaurs, and Juggling. Here are some sample course descriptions:

**Ancient Egypt** -- Students discover how the papyrus plant can be used for writing material, create dioramas for visual presentation of the Nile River and surrounding areas, decipher hieroglyphics, and make mummies, among other explorations. They answer imagination questions like, "Where would you build a pyramid?" "What materials would you use?" "What would you put inside it?" At the end of each lesson, the kids have a deeper understanding of life in Ancient Egypt and an ignited spark of curiosity and interest about cultures of the past.

**Photography Center** -- Students learn how to make better photographs with the knowledge that their images may be published in the yearbook and/or our Village Voice newsletter. The curriculum is based on journalistic principles of storytelling through photographs. Each week a new idea is introduced, while practicing previous weeks' lessons. Students learn to "see" like a

camera. They are challenged to capture decisive moments that tell a story. It's a tall order, but the main objective is to have fun. Village parent Jim says, "I got involved with the Photography Center because we needed someone to coach the kids in taking pictures for the school yearbook. Photojournalism is my profession and I've taught at the college level so it was a natural fit."

During the school year the Center Supervisors monitor all the Centers to ensure that the Center Leads have everything they need to effectively carry out the curriculum and to assess and evaluate the program. There are also student and teacher surveys at the end of each school year and new ideas and suggestions are integrated into the program the following year.

Center topics are evaluated every year and leverage parent expertise and interest: A NASA scientist amongst our parents resulted in a Space Center, Photography Center was spearheaded by a professional photographer, Spanish speakers lead the Spanish Center. Some Center topics are staples, but the specific content changes each year, such as the Cooking Center. Other Centers are fluid from year to year but build upon previous years. For example, we have Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome, and Ancient Greece which are on a 3-year rotation, so students experience a progressive depth of knowledge.

Over the course of their time at Village School, students sample an enormously broad range of enrichment topics. Centers are extremely popular with the students and launch them into learning experiences that contribute to their love of learning, lead them to pathways they may not have otherwise discovered and provide them with opportunities to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

### 3. Results of the Practice

The key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills emphasized in the Common Core State Standards of collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity have long been a part of the Village School Centers curriculum. In our "Stop Motion Animation" Center, K-2nd students **collaborate** by working together in groups of 2 to 3 to make an animated short in the style of "Gumby" using iPads. They use **critical thinking** skills to write their scripts, determine their props and plan their movies. They **communicate** with each other throughout the process by assigning different roles, talking about how to design their background, developing the characters for their script and then presenting their final movie to the group. Finally, they use their **creativity** to come up with some imaginative stories including Lego wars among Lego figures, ponies lost in the forest, and birds flying through castles. It's great fun to see the inventiveness of a few young minds working together.

Upper Grade students tackle more sophisticated topics. In the Roller Coaster Design Center, students **collaborate** by working together to build unique roller coaster designs. They use **critical thinking** skills to understand the physics involved, represented by the twists and turns of the tracks. Working in teams, they **communicate** their designs to other student participants and the Center Leads. Finally they use their **creativity** to design the most fun rollercoaster 8- to 11-year-olds can dream up.

Village is proud that its Centers Program has been providing Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math (STEAM) opportunities to its students since the school's founding.

Village has long been a high-achieving school, with an approach to education that has differed from the “teach-to-the-test” practice so recently prevalent. As our state moves forward with the adoption of the Common Core curriculum, and our district moves forward with a concerted effort to incorporate STEAM as a strategic initiative, Village can confidently say that it is well positioned to embrace these changes and in fact has been living them all these years.

Our teachers blend rigorous academic concepts with performance-based lessons in which students work on real-world problems. We strive to innovate, because our students and staff are innovators, and change is constant.

Families contribute their expertise in facilitating Center activities to bring our community of learners together. Engineers, nurses, carpenters, bakers, artists, and lawyers working to contextualize standards-based instruction through hands-on, project-based, cooperative learning for all students is the foundation of the STEAM initiative.

What are the results of the Centers program? Happy and engaged learners who have excelled on California state standardized tests, but more importantly, who have had the opportunity to extend their learning in a hands on way working with caring adults who are passionate about a subject area or are professionals in their field.

At some schools, hands-on learning opportunities have been reserved for GATE students. Not at Village! All students experience this type of teaching and learning and benefit. Village school 5<sup>th</sup> graders consistently test among the highest in the district and the state in Science. (From 89 to 96 percent of students scored proficient or advanced between 2010 to 2013.) The hands-on Centers curriculum contributes to this student success by bringing science concepts to life.

For the past four years, Village has been ranked in the top 10 percent of all California Schools based on API scores with all reportable ethnic subgroups earning scores over 900. 2013 was the first year scores have been reported for Village’s growing English learner population. In this first year of reporting, Village’s ELLs scored an impressive 889.

Our learning community is certainly pleased with these academic accomplishments. The high API score is seen as a byproduct of the work being done at Village School and proof that a hands-on, whole-child non-traditional approach to teaching and learning works. A more valued measure of success is the feedback from Village alumni who keep in contact with the school:

A mother of two Village alumni, now 21 and 24, says, “What I wanted for my children from their elementary education was of course to learn the basics, but also for them to love school and learning. I wanted school to be interactive, exploratory, fun and engaging. I wanted the teachers to be approachable and not harried, with too many kids vying for limited attention. And this was truly accomplished. Both of my children have grown up to be avid learners, are very inquisitive, and have excellent relationships with their teachers. They are both actively pursuing advanced degrees today, and still loving school and learning.”

Centers is truly an enrichment program for all who participate, and is a shining example of what we can do together to enhance our children’s education experience.