

Developing Dispositions for 21st Century Learning at Dolsen

By Laura Weakland,
4th Grade Teacher
Dolsen Elementary

When teachers at Dolsen returned to school for professional learning, they were confronted with the question, "What do you want the children you teach to be like as adults?" At the end of the discussion, an image had emerged of a child who is creative, hard-working, inquisitive, honest, empathetic, respectful, persistent, independent, compassionate, a leader, a team player, a problem-solver, a life-long learner, and a global citizen. Ron Ritchhart, author of *Making Thinking Visible*, has asked this same question to teachers and parents all over the world with surprisingly similar results. Accordingly, the staff at Dolsen has embarked on a journey to educate the whole-child and to foster and develop the dispositions needed for 21st century learning. This commitment includes supporting student learning in both the cognitive and social-emotional domains.

For two years Dolsen has been working on developing a "culture of thinking" for students and staff. One of the driving questions teachers ask themselves everyday is "What kinds of thinking do I value and want to promote in my classroom?" Teachers have embraced the cognitive thinking "moves" that are integral to understanding in their lesson planning: describing what's there, building explanations, reasoning with evidence, making connections, considering different viewpoints, capturing the heart, wondering, and uncovering complexity. Student thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted on a daily basis!

In order to support social-emotional learning and the Dolsen school rules of "taking care of ourselves, each other, and our school" the staff embarked on a "Taking Care of Others" initiative last year. This initiative helps students develop empathy, compassion, and acceptance for others. Students have the opportunity to join a Helping Hands Club and a Kind Kids Club. Teachers across the building are reading aloud books with strong themes of compassion and kindness. This initiative won a 2nd place 2014 Excellence in Education award sponsored by Oakland Schools and the Oakland Press.

This year the staff and students added an additional "Taking Care of Ourselves" layer to help students in developing the "habits of mind" necessary to be successful in school. As part of "taking care of ourselves," students will be working to demonstrate leadership and accountability for their own learning. Families were treated this year to a student-run portion of Curriculum Night. Each student was assigned a certain part of the classroom and was responsible for explaining to parents about the learning going on in the classroom. Approximately 70 additional books were also purchased for teachers and students to help support "taking care of ourselves/others" discussions in the classroom.

In order for students to be successful in the 21st century, they will need more than the traditional "Rs" of learning: reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. At Dolsen, the staff is strongly committed to educating the whole-child and embracing a new vision of learning – one that teaches the skills and dispositions necessary for success in the 21st century. This vision of learning helps students become active thinkers that are responsible leaders of their own learning and are able to communicate, problem-solve, and express compassion and empathy for others. What do you want the children you raise to be like as adults?