

SHARPening learning: Interactive program expands into Waukesha district

By Ashley Haynes
Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA — The non-profit SHARP Literacy, Inc. has been around for 21 years in the Milwaukee area. An important challenge faced by Wisconsin educators is closing the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers. The Sharp Literacy program focuses on encouraging learning by incorporating hands-on learning in the classroom. It provides teachers with interactive learning ideas. The enrichment program focuses on urban populations of children and teaches them through a mixture of curriculum-based educational tours and art-based learning. Now, the SHARP program is moving into the Waukesha School District.

“It’s hard to describe our program, because there’s so many components to our program,” said Lynda Kohler, current president and CEO.

SHARP Literacy was founded in 1994 by Marlene Kreilkamp, who noticed how children connected to artwork during tours of the Milwaukee Art Museum. The original program’s signature was an annual trip to the museum. It soon changed to meet the changing demands of the community. The program, now tailored for K4 through fifth-grade

students, includes classroom presentations, an annual young artists’ workshop, educational tours and year-end writing challenges.

“Our mission is to enhance future life success by energizing urban scholars,” said Kohler. “We give them the foundation to become productive members of society.”

Bringing learning to life

All of the curriculum for SHARP is created in-house and later taught to educators through workshops. SHARP-trained educators bring learning to life in the classroom. Third-grade students who are learning about science and social studies don’t just read out of a book. They examine artifacts that are brought in by staff and even help produce their own urban agriculture book.

Students have researched and written 13 “We Love to Learn” books on topics they learn in the classroom. They also illustrate the books, which are produced in both English and Spanish. The books are then used as classroom aids. Over the past 20 years, students also created 20 mosaic murals in prominent areas in Milwaukee.

“If the kids can see it, they can understand the concept better than they can if it were traditional learning,” said Kohler.

Of course, the mainstay of the program is the partnerships with various museums

and organizations across the city. As SHARP moves into Waukesha, the partnerships will stay within the area to promote the community. Partnerships with the EB Shurts Environmental Education Center, Prairie Springs Environmental Education Center and the Waukesha County Museum have already been established. Three local elementary schools piloted the program last school year, and now that number will increase to six.

“We’re all in pretty much urban schools in Waukesha County as well,” said Kohler.

She says that as she lived in Waukesha County, she became alarmed at the amount of elementary school students who did not read proficiently. The need for expansion of the SHARP program has also become greater as some schools cut art out of their curriculum. SHARP helps preserve art in the classroom.

“We maintain professional development throughout the school year and we have a lot of great results,” said Kohler.

Sharp Literacy is 100 percent privately funded. The program aligns with Common Core state standards. Kohler hopes to expand the program to more schools in the coming years.

For more information, visit www.sharpliteracy.org.

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