

SYNERGY TIMES

The Newsletter of Synergy School

Spring 2022



Social Emotional Learning Across the Grades

by Jasmine Kitses, Middle School Language Arts Teacher

In a recent morning meeting, students in 8th grade took part in a simple activity. The prompt was to explain the work the adults in their family do—in the home, in the community, or at a paid job.

Students were a little reluctant to jump in (it was 8:50 am), so I told them about my grandfather who worked as a milkman, a bus driver, and a bartender. As kids began to share, we learned about family members working in hospitals, businesses, and the arts—about journalists, therapists, teachers. We learned about community organizers and lawyers, caretakers, and homemakers. By the end of

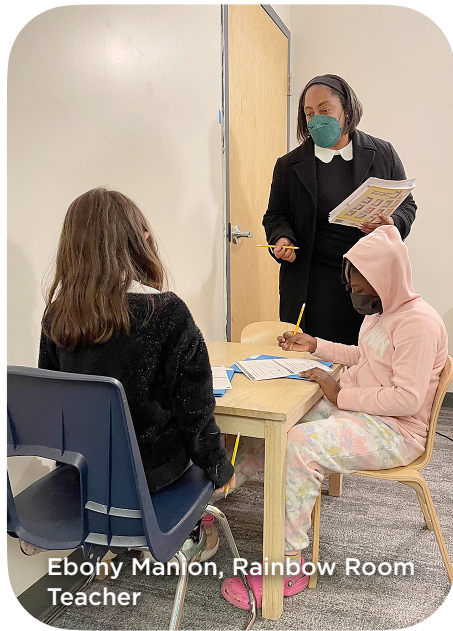
our twenty-minute conversation, the room felt a little different. Despite the masks, we could all see each other a little more clearly.

Morning meetings, along with our weekly advisory classes in middle school, are part of Synergy's commitment to SEL, or Social Emotional Learning. According to CASEL, a 1994 initiative dedicated to SEL in schools, "SEL is the process through which all young people... acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal

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“With its longtime focus on empathy and supportive relationships, SEL has always been at the core of Synergy’s educational philosophy.”



Ebony Manion, Rainbow Room Teacher



Morning Meeting in the Soft-Yard

and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” With its longtime focus on empathy and supportive relationships, SEL has always been at the core of Synergy’s educational philosophy. The Agreement System is built on a foundation of empathy and care, with its commitment to keeping a “safe space for people’s bodies and feelings” and creating “a respectful learning community free of bias.” Yet just as the social and emotional landscape of young people’s lives has changed across time, with shifts in technology, social media, and the pandemic, for instance, Synergy continues to evolve in its approaches to Social Emotional Learning.

In our present moment, SEL is more crucial than ever. As kids learn to manage the social and emotional turmoil brought on by the pandemic—online learning models, social isolation, distance from family, limits on sports and

social rituals—teachers must reassess the kinds of curriculum we should offer to support them. In middle school, the decision to incorporate Second Step’s SEL curriculum three years ago really paid off during remote learning, as lessons translated well to Zoom, and the company released additional pandemic-related activities. This year, the co-op decided to expand the program school-wide, so that it is now taught in grades TK-8. Ebony Manion spoke about the benefits of using Second Step to guide conversations in the Rainbow Room (1st/2nd grades), saying that “In this time with so much uncertainty, Second Step supplies teachers with the tools to educate students about their emotions and what to do with them. My class completed a unit on Emotions. From the sample lessons, the class was equipped with real-life scenarios on being proud and disappointed. Afterwards, we used those lessons to write Small Moment stories.”

Second Step also complements other SEL programs in place at the school, such as the Sun Room’s (2nd/3rd grades) SMARTS curriculum, with its focus on executive function. In middle school, each year of Second Step begins with a unit on Mindset and Goals, and asks students to consider not only their personal goals but also the obstacles that can derail their intentions. The unit aligns well with Synergy’s goal-setting conferences but is also valuable for discussing students’ wider aspirations and dreams, and helping them with life skills. There are additional units on Bullying and Harassment, Emotions and Stress, and Healthy Relationships, all of which center on healthy communication, advocacy, and respect. As each year repeats central themes while building new knowledge and competencies, teachers can use the lessons on a sequential or as-needed basis, moving the units around to fit the needs of their class. Middle School Math



Middle School Students at Morning Meeting



Jasmine Kitses, Middle School Teacher

Teacher Dan Gelfand claims that “While formulaic, Second Step is structured to allow a lot of conversation around the topic it addresses. We had a number of good talks about how to handle the cascade of emotions that occurs with the onset of puberty.”

One of the most valuable aspects of Second Step is its ethical approach to SEL and its commitment to diversity. The program regularly draws on student testimonials from a diverse group of students who talk

shoes. Mac Gross, an 8th grader at Synergy, says “Second Step tells a very realistic view of what it’s like to be a teenager. It makes me feel normal for having these feelings, and gives tools for how to help.” Along with the testimonials, there are useful definitions and concepts—such as the difference between bullying and harassment—that facilitate important discussions. Finally, there are hands-on activities that draw from students’ prior knowledge and ask them to reflect on their

can feel reluctant, shy, or embarrassed to share their thoughts on difficult and personal topics. But as teachers, we hope to cultivate consistent opportunities for kids to reflect on the benefits of sharing their emotions, goals, frustrations, and questions along with their peers. The familiar framework of Second Step, with its supportive presentations, activities, discussions, and videos, gives students a sense of reassurance, and a starting point for this essential work.

As a school, we are continually looking for ways to deepen our commitment to SEL. Recently, middle school aide Ariel Leighton and I attended Natasha Singh’s excellent four-part workshop for educators on *Sexual Literacy*, which gave us tools and food for thought as we continue to support our students’ social and emotional development in these areas. We hope to continue these conversations with our community, as we all navigate this new social landscape together. ∞

“One of the most valuable aspects of Second Step is its ethical approach to SEL and its commitment to diversity.”

about their experiences in a direct and real way. Kids appreciate hearing other kids talk about topics they care about, allowing them to identify with their peers and/or step into someone else’s

own values and experiences, adding their voices to the topic.

As we all know, it can be difficult to be vulnerable in front of one’s peers. We honor the fact that our students—just like us—



Covid Sniffing Dogs Working in a School Setting



Children Greet Scarlett

COVID - Detecting Dogs Visit Synergy School

by Susanne DeRisi, MLIS, Librarian and “Binax Lead” for the Synergy Lab

Synergy School students and staff had the exciting opportunity in February to participate in research that may benefit schools all around the state of California.

On February 14th and 28th, medical alert dogs Scarlett and Rizzo, their handlers from Early Alert Canines, and researchers from the California Department of Public Health visited Synergy School as part of a pre-pilot project to investigate if medical detection dogs trained to detect the scent of COVID-19 infections can be used to effectively screen students in a school setting.

Over 170 students and staff volunteered to participate, giving the dogs and their handlers valuable experience working in a school setting. Once Scarlett and Rizzo become more accustomed to working in small schools like ours, they will get a chance to visit bigger schools with more students. The hope is that eventually, large schools in California could benefit

from using trained medical alert dogs as a fast, efficient, and cost-effective way to perform an initial screening for COVID-19 infections.

At Synergy, classrooms took turns lining up outdoors, some giggling with excitement as each dog walked by and sniffed their feet. The dogs are trained to alert their handlers by sitting briefly when they detect the target scent. Sometimes, Scarlett and Rizzo found an interesting scent but were unsure if it was the target scent. The dogs were obviously eager to play the COVID detection game and please their handlers. They got treats for staying focused and doing their job.

Learning to be an effective COVID dog detective takes a lot of practice. Scarlett and Rizzo, both 2-year-old yellow labradors, began training several weeks beforehand to detect the scent of people with COVID-19 infections. They worked four days a week

with trainers at Early Alert Canines using a scent wheel containing socks collected from patients with COVID infections.

After participating in the research, the children were allowed to meet the dogs and pet them if they wished. Finally, all of the participants were given a rapid antigen test to confirm and/or compare the dogs’ findings. In cases where the dogs alerted or showed particular interest in a participant, but the rapid antigen test was negative, a PCR test was given as well. At this very early stage of the project, the researchers are just beginning to understand how sensitive and accurate the dogs may be at detecting the scent of COVID-19 infections in the real world.

Thank you to our staff and families who volunteered to help with this very unique project and to our intrepid Synergy COVID Lab Team who performed the rapid antigen testing and recorded results. ∞



Eighth Grade Puerto Rico Service Learning Trip

by *The Eight Grade Class*

In February, Synergy's eighth-grade class traveled to Puerto Rico for a week of service-learning with Global Works. This class trip was our first class trip out of California since the start of the pandemic in 2020. Our trip was an experience that we will never forget. As a class, we looked forward to our 8th grade trip for years, and it exceeded all of our expectations.

We arrived in Puerto Rico and got our luggage, then we took a bus to the Big Yellow House and had some pizza and met our Global Works guides. We explored the house and settled in. The next day, we visited the historical landmarks in Old San Juan. We explored forts, wildlife, and a church. We ate lunch in a restaurant, where we had delicious and authentic Puerto Rican food.

The following day, we took a long bus ride to the rolling rainforest hills, "Eye on the Rainforest," where we had a beautiful view of the Caribbean and wildlife. We worked trimming trees and breaking down an old wooden stage. After working hard,

we returned to the Big Yellow House and went swimming at the nearby beach.

On our third day, we met Global Works leaders, William and Angel, and we helped to rebuild the roof of William's house that was damaged in Hurricane Maria. We shoveled materials and carried them up to the roof to the cement mixer. We even had the opportunity to lay cement. We worked on that site for three days before it was time to go home.

"Working and living alongside each other, we all became closer and learned new things about each other."

On our final day, we went souvenir shopping and had one last adventure on our rainforest hike, during which we swam, hiked through the mud, and had fun with the rope swing. We went to a new place to stay, and after night fell, we went to a

bioluminescent bay to do some night kayaking and stargazing. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The next day, we packed our bags before heading to the airport. Once we landed in Houston, we had to run to our next flight and arrived in San Francisco late at night.

Being in Puerto Rico was a fantastic learning experience for all of us. We learned so many new skills, and it was an eye-opening experience. The family we worked with was welcoming and cooked

us a delicious lunch. Working and living alongside each other, we all became closer and learned new things about each other. Meeting new people and learning how to work with building materials in a tropical climate was a rare and lucky experience. ∞



A Renovation Story

by Rea Inglesis, Skylights Teacher, and Russ Curtis, Director of Technology

How do you squeeze more space out of a small school? Very delicately.

That's what Synergy's Buildings and Grounds Task Force discovered three years ago when it started looking into maximizing the learning spaces in a 120 year old building. It has been nearly 25 years since Synergy bought and first renovated 1387 Valencia Street, and we have grown so much since then!

We were so pleased to secure the services of a competent and time conscious architect and building contractor. Plum Architects and Hoi Construction had plenty of experience working with schools and were familiar with the short time table - 10 weeks of summer break. The \$1 million project is part of a school improvement plan and was approved by the Board of Trustees for 2020, but delayed until 2021 due to coronavirus-related concerns.

A 2020 Master Plan survey of students, staff and parents,

highlighted the need for classroom space, small group learning and meeting spaces, storage for Middle Schoolers belongings, and updated bathrooms. Our architect creatively helped us meet some of these pressing needs by carving out space from the large bathrooms on both floors.

The renovation was completed just as the school opened in August 2021 for the new school year and the response of staff, teachers and kids has been overwhelmingly positive.

The classroom dubbed the Little Room was converted from the former staff room. Cubicle dividers were replaced with a wall and dedicated door. The space was refashioned to maximize square footage, provide instructional technology and storage for materials.

We now have several private spaces for small groups, meetings and other work to occur and all our

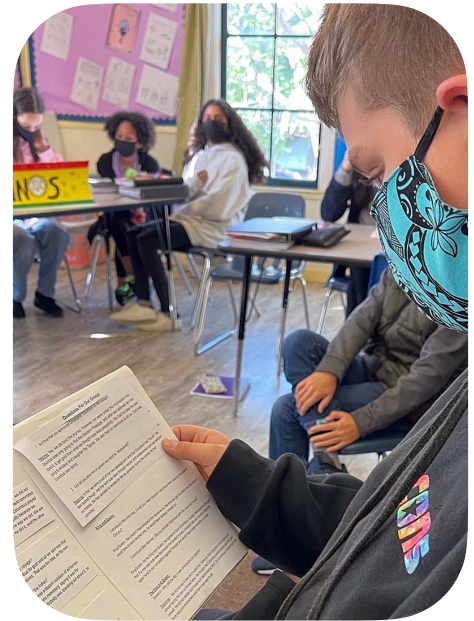
upstairs students have new, larger lubbies (cubby/lockers) for their belongings. Our halls are decluttered with new carpeting and a fresh, cool color scheme. Students and staff can now use the facilities in clean comfort, which is a luxury not to be minimized!

The improvements will continue to make the space more usable as we tackle the more complex and time consuming heating, cooling, and ventilation (HVAC) upgrade. COVID-19 supply chain issues and scheduling problems have prolonged that part of the project with completion expected in Summer 2022.

The HVAC project will replace an old system with cooling for the whole building, including much needed air conditioning for second floor classrooms. Improved air flow will enhance conditions for learning, while more energy efficient systems will lighten our footprint on the earth. ∞



Middle School Teacher Dominic Altieri with Students



History Project: Columbus Trail

by Zoe Polsky, Synergy 8th Grade Student

This was the 3rd year I taught using the Columbus Trial Project. It was created by Bill Bigelow in the Rethinking Schools / Rethinking Columbus publication. The project was inspired by a People's History by Howard Zinn, and they did publish this assignment to the Zinn Education Project (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/people-vs-columbus/>). The project includes primary sources such as Columbus's journal, the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas and other various texts and artwork from the time. I have spoken with several Synergy alumni over the years, and they often repeat this project in high school in AP US History.

by Dominic Altieri, Middle School History Teacher

This trimester, our history project was the Columbus Trial. We put Christopher Columbus as well as the other groups and people involved on trial. Our history teacher, Dominic Altieri, was the judge. He split us into table groups of five people, with a mix of sixth,

seventh, and eighth graders and each student played an important role. There was one attorney, one to two paralegals, a defendant, and one to two historical experts. Each group got assigned a person, group of people or a system. These groups represented the Tainos native people, Columbus's men, the King and Queen of Spain, and Christopher Columbus himself.

My group represented Columbus's men, which was a challenge considering we disagreed with most of their actions. However, we understood that for this assignment we would need to push ourselves and try to alter our perspectives to understand what they may have been thinking at the time. We focused more on how badly Columbus treated his men and how that may have affected the way they treated others. This helped our case and the jury found us only twenty percent guilty.

Each group's defendant took the stand to answer the questions of the attorneys. The attorneys

questioned what happened at the time and the intentions of the defendant, while the defendant sat on a stool in front of the room. Based on the defendants' answers to the questions, as well as the group's open and closing statements, the jury gives a percentage based on how guilty the defendant appears. The jury was made of each group's historical experts.

Additionally, each group made a sign, with the name of the group they represented, as well as a few related drawings. On the back of the signs, there were the opening statement, questioning, and closing statement. Producing the poster prepared our group for the trial and set us up for success. Additionally, the creative aspect of the assignment pushed our group to be innovative and work together. Overall, this project taught me and my classmates the different perspectives of the Christopher Columbus story, as well as how the court works in the real world in an engaging and creative way. ∞



Diverse Books & Culturally Responsive Teaching

by Kinne Chapin, Sun Room Teacher

Last year, in our virtual auction, the Synergy community raised over \$45,000 for a lofty Fund-a-Need goal — increasing representation in our classroom libraries and engaging in professional development to help us create more inclusive and just classrooms for all of our students. The purpose of this fundraiser was to ensure that all students at Synergy have access to “windows” and “mirrors” throughout their school year. A “mirror” text or resource reflects and affirms a students’ own identity, while a “window” text or resource provides insight into a different perspective or lived experience.

This year, the Fund-a-Need committee has been hard at work to help Synergy teachers spend this money! The committee developed a system to distribute the funds among the staff by splitting the money for purchasing books and curriculum equally between all classrooms and subjects and reserving half of the

funds for professional development.

Synergy teachers are hard at work auditing their classroom libraries and curriculum to determine any gaps in representation or existing stereotypes. The Fund-a-Need committee researched several curriculum auditing resources. It developed a “scorecard” for teachers that asks them to evaluate statements like, “The curriculum features visually diverse characters, and the characters of color do not all look alike,” and “Guidance is provided on giving students opportunities to contribute their prior knowledge and experience with a topic, not just respond to the text and information presented in class.”

After teachers determine their needs, they will submit an order for additional texts and curriculum resources to address these gaps. The goal is for teachers to purchase “own voices” texts, or those written by an author of the

identity group represented in the text, whenever possible.

Inspired by the Fund-a-Need, some Synergy teachers have already started researching and committing to professional development opportunities focused on social justice, equitable classrooms, and culturally responsive teaching. Synergy teachers will attend the (virtual) NAIS People of Color Conference held in late November. More teachers are excited to take advantage of professional development opportunities in the new year.

So, with many thanks to the committee for their hard work and our community for their incredible generosity, we are ready to use these funds to support our ongoing work of building a more just, equitable, and socially conscious school. ∞



Synergy School 2020-2021 Annual Report

Gifts to the Synergy Annual Fund

Thank you for your support.

We are grateful for the generosity of our donors who helped to raise \$367,587 for the Synergy Annual Fund in 2020-2021. Our Board participation in the Annual Fund was 100%, and Synergy families' participation was 95%.

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Thank you for your generous support!

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Synergy Times is published twice a year by the Development Office of Synergy School. Feedback and story ideas are welcome.

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Our mission is to nurture the intellectual, creative, and emotional potential of every child in a community dedicated to diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

Synergy School was founded in 1973 and is a non-profit educational cooperative, wherein students, parents, staff, and teachers cooperate together to further a rewarding education for each child. We are a vibrant, diverse community with 190 students in transitional kindergarten through eighth grade located in San Francisco's Mission District.

Synergy Annual Fund



Every Gift Counts

The Annual Fund helps to bridge the gap between tuition and the actual cost of educating a student at Synergy School for a full year.

The support we receive from our community of parents, friends, alumni and grandparents helps Synergy to maintain the strength of our program while keeping our tuition affordable and offering financial aid to at least a third of our community.

Every gift counts. Donate online at www.synergyschool.org/giving

If you have any questions about donations, please contact Liz McDonald, Director of Development, at liz@synergyschool.org.

Thank you for your support!