

JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

DFHS students (standing) Lindsay Hornstein, Inez Kohtio, Kylie Hogan, and Zoya Gupta and (sitting) Ariana Biberaj, Benjamin O'Connor-Skloot, and Ava Neumaier during Sarah Stern's social studies class on Jan. 27.

## Teachers collaborate to invigorate learning

By Kris DiLorenzo

**DOBBS FERRY** — A cohort of teachers from the Dobbs Ferry School District's three schools is brainstorming monthly in the district's Innovative Classroom Initiative (ICI), sharing information about classroom practices and exploring how children can have "choice and voice" in their education.

ICI was launched to help develop a supportive environment in which teachers across the K-12 spectrum could collaborate and learn together.

Risk-taking and reflection are major components of the initiative, as teachers discuss the roles of physical space, project-based learning, mindfulness, and technology in encouraging students to be globally conscious, lifelong learners. For example, a session might comprise redesigning a lesson plan with help from colleagues, incorporating meditation as part of social

and emotional learning, or creating flexible classroom spaces that enable small "pods" of students to work together.

The first cohort of teachers voluntarily participated in the initiative last fall, and a second cohort has started this month — a total of 21. For those unable to attend the complete program, the district established an à la carte menu of half-day sessions on topics of interest.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Douglas Berry explained the thinking behind the initiative: "We felt there was value in creating for teachers across the district an opportunity to collaborate in an environment that is risk-free, and encourage them to think outside the norms of what most people would think was a traditional classroom."

Rather than a freewheeling give-and-take, the sessions are structured, using the inquiry approach. Each monthly session, morning or afternoon, kicks off with a question of the

day, such as "How can we cultivate a social, emotional, and academic environment that inspires passion, engaged learning, and student empowerment?"

That question led to another: "When was a time you took a risk and failed? Explain why you felt like you failed."

Amber Klebanoff, the district's instructional innovation support specialist, is on hand to facilitate the sessions and work with teachers in the classroom. Each participant develops a teacher innovation exploration plan (TIEP) during the course of the program.

"The teachers have to identify a problem of practice," Klebanoff explained. "It's a cycle of trial and error, creating an action plan, seeing what works. The goal for the end of this year is teachers sharing what their TIEP was, what they did to get to the end goal, if they

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## ICI

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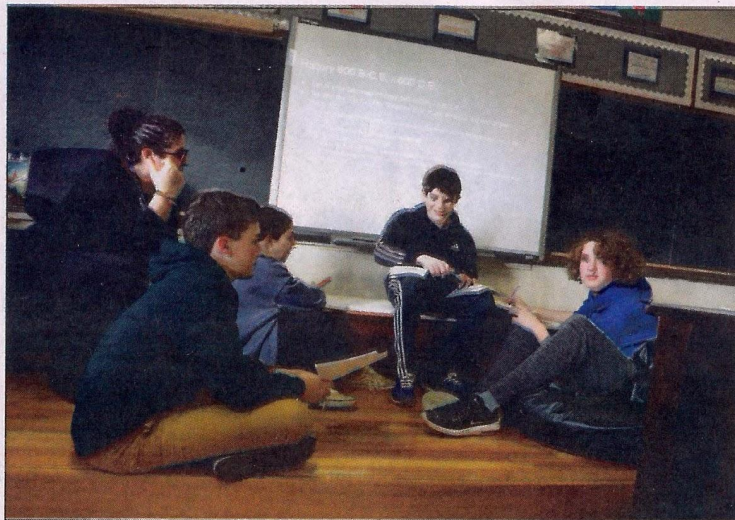
got to the end goal. Some teachers may not get to the end goal," she added, "and that's OK. Whatever you're doing is OK."

Berry emphasized that the sessions are a safe environment for teachers to talk about issues, share possible solutions before trying out new ideas in the classroom, and report back to their colleagues.

"It's OK to fail, OK to try different things in the classroom, to provide more choices. The first or second time you do it, it might not work," he said. "Teachers feel the freedom to attempt these in their classroom, which ultimately will be to the benefit of their students. We want classrooms to be risk-free environments for the students to step out of their comfort zone."

To create that environment, the teachers explain to students what they're doing, give them more choice, and ask for feedback, so that the "learning loop" reflects students' needs and the ways they learn best, giving them ownership and power over their education.

Berry contrasts this instructional strategy with "the days when students were vessels, and teachers filled them up with information."



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Teacher Amber Klebanoff works with students David Ducic, Efi Kostiou, Aidan Crowe, and Jake Rumbold on Jan. 27.

Jennifer Hickey, sixth-grade teacher at Dobbs Ferry Middle School, was in the ICI's first cohort, and is staying for the rest of the year. Last fall, she invented "Wonder Wednesdays."

On Wonder Wednesdays, her stu-

dents develop an inquiry project of interest to them, discover what makes a good research question, and then brainstorm about how to investigate. Research skills are built into the process — and students learn that they can work with a librarian,

not just spend their time Googling information. Ultimately, the students create a product to showcase their learning.

Wonder Wednesdays were a hit with Hickey's students. "They would come into class very excited, and there were so many types of products," she enthused. "One girl was investigating the physics behind roller coasters... Another student was looking at how to design a room to be more accessible for somebody with disabilities. We had two students collaborating on writing a science-fiction book."

Many students favored sports projects, but one was different: determining whether the payroll of the New England Patriots football team affects their performance. The student found that some high-salaried players' performances showed a positive correlation, but the same was not true for others with high salaries. He noted that if he were to continue with the project, he'd review several years' statistics to find out whether there was any change.

ICI participants are sharing their discoveries with colleagues who aren't part of the initiative. At Springhurst Elementary School, teachers have formed professional learning groups to disseminate their work.

Klebanoff summed up the premise of the initiative in simple language: "We get used to what we know. We don't know what we don't know."