

# Breathing life into writing

By Alita Savory

HEATH—Students shuffle in from music class, chatting as they get into their seats. There are 20 of them: six third-graders and 14 fourth-graders. This is Jorie MacLeod's class: she teaches them history, math, and, of course, writing. A couple of children flip open books and try to get through another few paragraphs before the class starts; others are snacking on pistachio nuts and more snacks. MacLeod rings a bell at the front of the class and says, "It's writing time."

MacLeod has been teaching for 23 years, 12 at Heath Elementary School. She has always used the writing process in her teaching, but during the summer she found something new: a book called *Breathing Life into Essays* by Lucy Calkins, an author whom

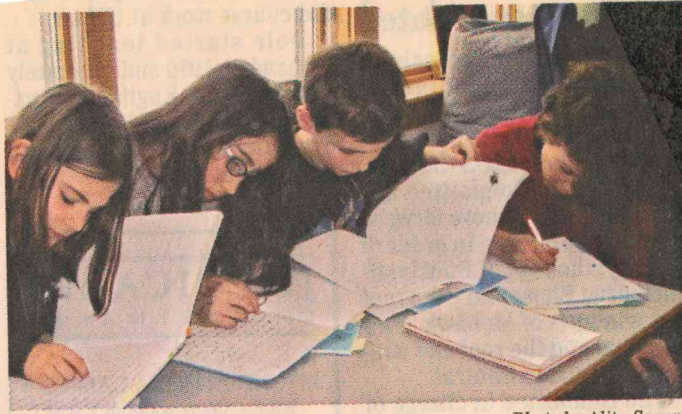


Photo by Alita Savory

**Fourth graders at the Heath School breath life into their essays. Picture are Izzy Brenizer (left), Alouette Batteau, Mac Sloan-Anderson and Timmy Burnes.**

MacLeod has read widely.

The writing process starts with ideas, then writing, then proof-reading, revising and rewriting. The book is written for teaching writing to grades 3-5.

"You have to absorb it," MacLeod said.

Calkins' technique still uses the writing process, but it also calls for workshops and focus. It takes time to read the book, and then go back and mark the necessary pages.

"This feels like it raises the

quality of the kids' writing," she said, "I'm seeing more in-depth and thoughtful writing."

MacLeod sent a few students, all 4th-graders, to the back table to talk about their writing. The boys, Timmy Burnes and Mac Sloan-Anderson, said they liked reading history books. Mac's favorite part of history is the American Revolution. Timmy also liked reading the *Artemis Fowl* series by Eoin Colfer.

The girls, Alouette Batteau

## WRITING.....from page 1

("it's French," she said) and Izzy Brenizer, said they liked reading different things, but mostly fiction. Alouette likes reading books by Rick Roiden and she started reading a lot last year.

"Now I'm reading the 6th [Harry Potter book] even though I already read it," Izzy said.

Just before the holidays, teachers at Heath decided to give students a school-wide writing prompt to pen a personal narrative about a person they cared about.

"The kids wrote for 45 minutes," MacLeod said.

The purpose of the exercise was to find out how different grades responded to it. Students said that while they were writing their response to the prompt, they were given a checklist that helped them remember to review their work for grammar, clarity and so on. The teachers have not yet read and compared the essays, but plan to do so soon.

Recently MacLeod put students to work on an essay they really liked.

"We brainstormed a bunch of ideas to write about, then picked them and wrote a bunch of essays, then picked our favorite to work on," Mac explained.

MacLeod has her class write for about 45 minutes. When the students break into workshops, a specific question is posed so

they have a strategy.

"We've been doing different things with essays for the past month," she said. "They just chose one of theirs and honed it. I'm very excited to read them. One kid is writing about time, and books and walks in the woods."

The little group had their blue writing journals in front of them, these favorite essays on top, in final draft form. They each read their work aloud to the group.

Mac wrote about his toy soldiers at his grandmother's house. Timmy wrote about owls and how "their eyes flicker like candles." Alouette wrote about a tree as a home for many animals. Izzy wrote about her rock collection, moving into abstraction with descriptions like "an island surrounded by forests" and describing the white foam of waves as "big teeth." Many of the essays were poetic and read like actual stories, filled with the childrens' imagination.

MacLeod meets with different groups while the rest of the class works on other things. They work not only on essay writing, but also on writing about what they're reading.

Clearly they do think about what they're reading—and writing—as a quotation on the wall suggests. It says, "Thinking pushes writing pushes thinking."