ACCESS Curriculum: Preparing the Scientists of Tomorrow

Lauren Caggiano

University of Dayton

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ACCESS Curriculum: Preparing the Scientists of Tomorrow

A curriculum developed by the Bombeck Family Learning Center and adopted by Dayton Public Schools has seen great success in execution.

The Bombeck Family Learning Center is the Early Childhood Education Demonstration School of the University of Dayton’s School of Education and Health Sciences. The center’s executive director, Shauna Adams, has been with UD for 25 years. With a background in elementary/special education and psychology, she has worked with the center since 1999.

Now in its third year at Dayton Public Schools, Adams shared how the development of the ACCESS Curriculum came about over a 10-year period.
“My co-authors were spending a lot of time in classrooms,” she said. “[In their] observations, they noticed teachers were having a hard time putting practices in place while making learning inspirational for students. There was a lot of disconnected activity during the day.”

Adams, along with colleagues and co-authors Dr. Joni Baldwin, Dr. Mary Kay Kelly and Joy Comingore, knew there had to be a better way. Using their knowledge and expertise, they developed a research-based curriculum known as ACCESS—which stands for Assessment Supported, Child Centered, Emergent/Negotiated, Science Emphasis and Standards Integrated—designed for children ages infancy through grade five. Aspects of the curriculum also can be applied to middle school classrooms.

According to the ACCESS Curriculum website, the authors developed the curriculum with teachers in mind, particularly those “who seek to create cohesive, engaging and meaningful curriculum. It also embraces children as capable thinkers who have important questions to be answered.” The curriculum also makes it easy to incorporate new content standards and/or developmental guidelines. The website provides a specific illustration:

“For example, in 2010 the Common Core Statement Standards were adopted by 45 states to represent what students in grades kindergarten through 12 should know and be able to do in the areas of literacy and math. Teachers using ACCESS reviewed the new content standards, compared them to prior standards and made adjustments to their authentic assessment system. Because the assessment system informs instruction, teachers learned the new content and incorporated it into their curriculum without having to completely revise their curriculum process. This same realignment process took place when the National Research Council released the final draft of the new science standards for grades kindergarten through 12 in 2013.”

As Adams describes it, ACCESS is a “good approach to connect learning in a meaningful way.”

And that learning is often focused on the sciences as prescribed by the ACCESS curriculum. ACCESS integrates the study of science “with opportunities for language, social, emotional, physical health, motor, aesthetic, and cognitive development as well as meaningful literacy, math and social studies learning with an emphasis on approaches to learning and executive functions,” per the website.

According to Adams, young children are naturally curious and science is a “good match” for this stage of development because it encourages a higher level thinking and problem solving. It ultimately prepares children for careers in STEM fields, she added.

Adams cites a generally accepted hypothesis: “If children are proficient in science by the end of the third grade, they are more apt to go into a science-related field.”

But a curriculum is only as good as its application. Rosa Parks Early Learning Center is one example of how ACCESS has benefited students in the Dayton area. Rosa Parks was originally a pre-K-8th grade building that was closed because of low enrollment and low achievement. The Dayton Public School (DPS) Superintendent, Lori Ward, and the project managers
selected the ACCESS curriculum because it is project and inquiry-based, according to Principal Michelle Fulcher. The DPS administration also believed it would be key in learning the New Ohio Standards for K-12 grade.

Fulcher said she has already seen a return on investment. There is a deeper level of learning. For example, three and four-year old students are thinking and talking like scientists.

“Students are excited to share their knowledge with each other and with adults,” she said. “We have seen a growth in vocabulary and language skills in our students.”

Speaking of knowledge, Fulcher said experts are invited to speak about the topics at hand. For example, the class studying dogs met a vet, a dog trainer and officer from the K-9 unit.

 “[This experiential learning] allows students begin to think about STEM careers,” she said. “Classes are reading non-fiction books to learn about the topics of study which ties in with the focus on non-fiction reading in the higher grades.”

These are very specific examples, but Fulcher points out the big-picture value, too. ACCESS challenges students to think more critically about the world — “to see something and wonder how it works, to ask questions, to observe and document those observations. This skills will start them on a road to success in school and beyond.”

For more information about The Bombeck Family Learning Center and the ACCESS Curriculum, contact Dr. Shauna Adams or visit the Bombeck Family Learning Center website.

Lauren Caggiano ’07

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