

# Worcester Partnership Broadens Horizons

By Susan Spencer

**B**ancroft School may be just a few miles from Elm Park Community School, a public elementary school in the heart of Worcester, but the students' experiences are often worlds apart—except for a unique program called the Worcester Partnership, a collaboration between the two schools that is designed to provide designated students from Elm Park an introduction to educational experiences and environments to which they might not ordinarily be exposed.

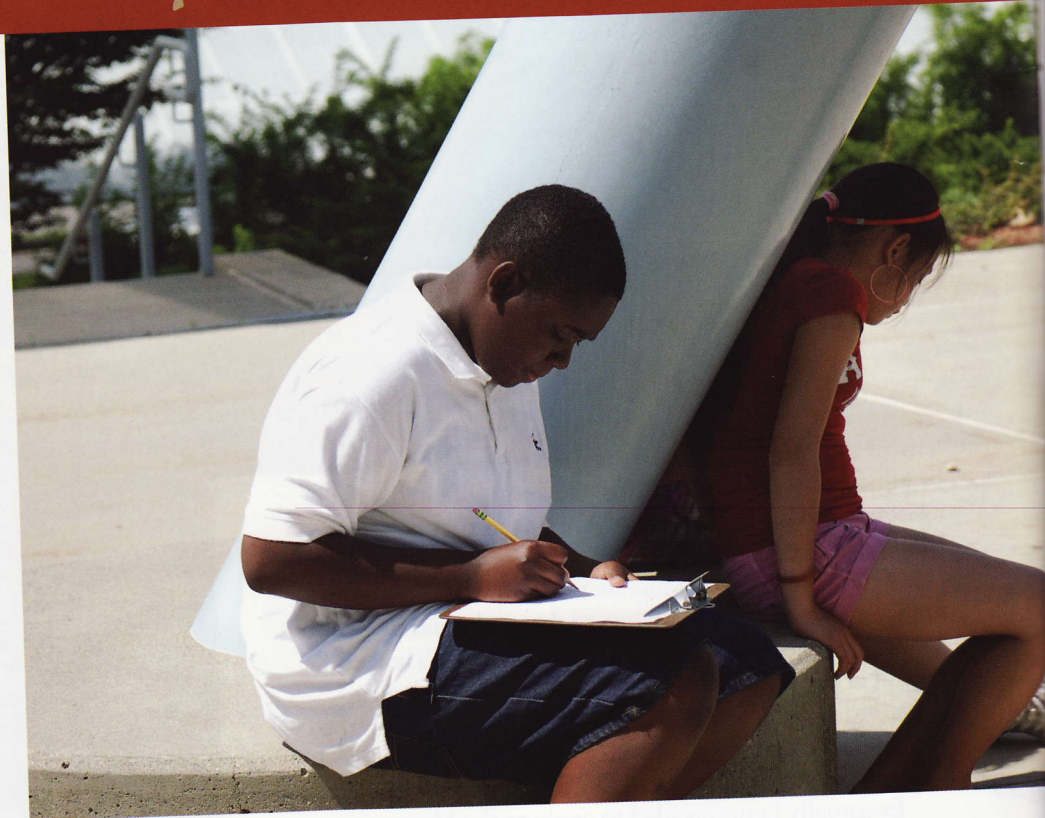
Elm Park students come from all over the world and speak 27 different languages at the school. Some children have lived in refugee camps. Over 90 percent of Elm Park students qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. School is a new experience for many of these students, who may not have attended preschool or even another elementary school where they were living before settling in the Elm Park neighborhood.

"They're learning a variety of cultural experiences in the United States and in Worcester," said Elm Park Community School Principal Ruthann Melancon.

This past summer, 12 Elm Park students, now seventh-graders, were the first class to graduate from the Partnership, which most began as kindergartners in 2003. The students completed a seven-year educational journey with the Bancroft School community, spending four weeks each July pursuing lively academic and day-camp activities, and continuing hands-on learning Saturdays and after school during the academic year.

The partnership was developed by longtime Bancroft faculty member, Charlie Aleksiewicz, who has directed and expanded the program since its inception by providing motivated students with the tools necessary to enter junior high school better prepared for their academic and social experience. Students gain the ability to problem-solve, question, explore, and attempt new things. Eighty-three students, roughly 12 in each grade level, currently are in the partnership.

"First and foremost the Worcester Partnership at Bancroft is here to serve our community through a con-



sistent, reliable, and supportive atmosphere where each individual is a contributing member of the group," said Aleksiewicz. "It is during these early years of development when children are learning to be learners and part of a larger community that we have a unique opportunity to set the stage for their future growth as students and good citizens."

Bancroft's partnership with Elm Park School was no accident, according to Aleksiewicz. The neighborhood was Bancroft School's first home, from 1900 until it moved to Shore Drive in 1958. And Melancon, Elm Park's principal, shared Aleksiewicz's vision of how the program could make a real difference in the lives of children facing cultural and educational challenges.

Scott Reisinger was Bancroft's headmaster in 2003 when he and Aleksiewicz, the director of special programs, were inspired by a similar partnership at an independent school they visited in Connecticut. But they wanted to design a program that would uniquely fit the school and the Worcester community.

"One of my dictates was to make whatever program created the quality of what Bancroft School stands for," Aleksiewicz said. All of the special programs, including the Worcester Partnership, feature a strong academic component, a hallmark of Bancroft.

The partnership's summer session is intended to combine the fun and spirit of camp with the challenge of the classroom. Students engage in collaborative projects for science, computer technology, writing, math, public speaking, and art history, to name a few. After a good breakfast,



Charlie Aleksiewicz

mornings are filled with classes in core subjects like math, science and English; while after lunch, it's time for swimming lessons at the Greendale YMCA, sports and arts activities. The school-year sessions in fall and winter include participation in Bancroft's "Saturday Specials," covering topics from space studies to robotics to cooking, and augmented by various social gatherings that are sponsored by the Bancroft's Upper School Social Concerns Committee.

Since the beginning, a team of Bancroft and Elm Park teachers has taught the academic sessions. The students who have gone through the program help out, too. "I'm still in contact with the original 10 children," Aleksiewicz said. "Eight of the 10 are here on Saturdays helping the teachers as aides."

Melancon cited the participation of former Bancroft student volunteers as a motivator for current Elm Park participants. She said, "They like the fact that some of these relationships continue year after year. To have someone who is older and experiencing college life is significant—they've never seen that. I think that's a real highlight." The partnership has opened doors to thinking about college and volunteering, often for the first time for some students. One former Elm Park student was so inspired by her partnership experience that she wants to give back by volunteering with Big Brothers Big Sisters, according to Melancon.

Others begin thinking about college aspirations. During one winter vacation, the students were bussed to Assumption College to watch a basketball game and afterward enjoy pizza with the players. "They didn't have any concept of what college is about. We really expanded that," Melancon said.

Eight Elm Park students, who have been a part of the partnership from its inception, were selected to partake in a new program last summer at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, furthering their college preparatory

experience. Joined by students from Boston, Worcester, and surrounding areas, the students participated in a two-week residential camp that promotes future careers in robotics, science, engineering, and mathematics.

Students' parents are actively involved throughout their time at Bancroft, another component of the partnership's success. The program conducts family reading activities at the library, and parents provide transportation to Saturday sessions.

The partnership's impact is measurable. Melancon wrote in a letter of support: "Early results demonstrate that students who have actively participated in the Worcester Partnership Program are academically at or above grade level and are reaching the proficiency level on local and state-mandated testing. Additionally, by providing support to students and their families throughout the school year, the result would be a model framework of support to students and families living in an urban setting that could be replicated."

Recently, Melancon said, "I get to see the smiles and hear the experiences. The students who participated have

all made 'proficiency' in terms of MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). We're basically enhancing the educational experience of each of these students, and seeing parent involvement as a highlight. The children are really excited about learning."

Elm Park students aren't the only ones who benefit from the partnership. Aleksiewicz said that 16 Bancroft Upper School students volunteered 834 hours last summer, helping as teachers' aides. "That to me speaks to the spirit and commitment of our students to support the local community," he said. "It's a great learning experience for our children as well as Elm Park children."

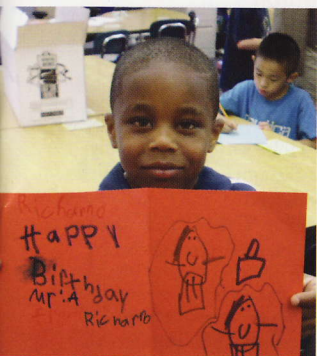
Aleksiewicz said that raising funds for the program, through Bancroft Special Programs, friends, corporations and foundations, is a challenge; but seeing the children grow over the years is an enormous reward. "We're grateful to all of our current and past supporters whose gifts have made this program possible."

Melancon credits Aleksiewicz for extending himself tremendously to young people. "He's such a real mentor and a role model for them. I've never met anybody like him," she said.

The Worcester Partnership upholds Bancroft's tradition of academic excellence, "but we make it so much fun, the participants will tell you they go to camp at Bancroft School," Aleksiewicz said. "It's a great thing for the school in so many ways and I'm glad I can continue doing what I love most."

To review a photographic slide show from the program please visit: [www.bancroftschool.org/partnership](http://www.bancroftschool.org/partnership).

*Susan Spencer is a current Bancroft parent and frequent writer for the Worcester Telegram & Gazette. She contributes on a freelance basis to several other newspapers, magazines, and trade journals year-round.*



Worcester Partnership Kindergarten students gather with Bancroft student volunteers.