

K Town fosters creativity at Erie Elementary School

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Skipping along a cobblestone street in a magical town created for kindergartners at Erie Elementary School is Principal Jerry Evanski, followed by Lacie Thiel, 5, far left, Alex Heumann, 6, Emma Kosanke, 6, and Thomas Kunnyalil, 5.

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Waving hello from K Town are Kathy Rimmel and her kindergarten class at Erie Elementary.

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Mary Kleinstiver, left, who is the muralist who created the kindergarten town, sits in the cafe while talking to Erie's PTO leader Deanna Kosanke.

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At Erie Elementary School in Clinton Township even the kindergartners are discovering the kind of leaders they can be.

One of them could even start a campaign to become mayor.

"Welcome to KTown," said Erie Elementary School's Principal Jerry Evanski Friday morning, walking through a set of double doors leading to the the kindergarten classrooms.

A few months ago it was just a hallway with white walls that children used to get from one place to another. Now the doors lead to a magical place with a cobblestone street and little shops that one might see in any American town.

"I love what we have created here," said Mary Kleinstiver of Mount Clemens and the muralist who was commissioned by the Parent Teacher Organization to transform the white space into a town for kindergartners featuring a café with a bistro table where little girls like to pretend they are having tea with their friends or a barber shop where a boy might imagine what he would look like with a mustache.

There's also a post office, florist shop with blooming flowers, candy store and a library.

The idea for the project grew out of the discussions among teachers, parents, staff (including one very smart custodian) and students looking to create a warm and inviting environment in line with the school's Leader in Me program.

The Leader in Me at Erie was started more than seven years ago and is part of a whole-school transformation model and process developed in partnership with educators that empowers students with the leadership and life skills they need to thrive in the 21st century. Erie Elementary was the first school in Macomb County to adopt the program. Since then it has blossomed into all sorts of projects

– which have not only increased engagement among teachers and parents but encouraged students to be leaders too.

"I had a couple of runners ask me if they could start a track team," said Evanski, who loves his school and was beaming with pride during a tour of the new addition.

However, elementary schools do not have track teams but instead of saying no and squashing the students' enthusiasm, Evanski suggested they start a running club instead. Sean Mahoney and Devon Bupreau are in high school now but the club they launched has grown to 50 members.

Another leadership initiative is Spice. During special assemblies members of this group are placed strategically or sprinkled-like-spice among younger students where they serve as role models. Grips is a body of students who handle the set up and tear down of equipment and displays during events. The school also has an application station, where students can apply for positions in the school. Evanski said it not only teaches kids how to fill out a job application but since the positions are age appropriate gives the younger students something to aspire to.

"Elementary school is such an important time in the life of a student," Evanski said. "It is a time of wonder. It's a time of discovery and it's a time of growth. It's up to us as teachers to find the genius in all of them."