

Personal Commitment, Programs Enhance Learning Process

Classroom Calling Is Answered

Even after going into private business following 10 years as a teacher, Gary Pritchard's career "calling" never waned. After 10 more years, he finally answered that call and returned to the classroom.

Now, it has been another 10 years and Pritchard is right where he wants to be.

Pritchard is currently a resource teacher at Kent Hills Elementary. He also runs the school's computer lab and serves as the building principal when needed.

"The whole idea behind resource is to go into the classroom and help students while a lesson is going on, or pull them out and work with them on more of a one-to-one basis," Pritchard said. "Hopefully, that will give them enough time to overcome some of their difficulties with learning."

Prior to that, Pritchard taught in a self-contained special education classroom.

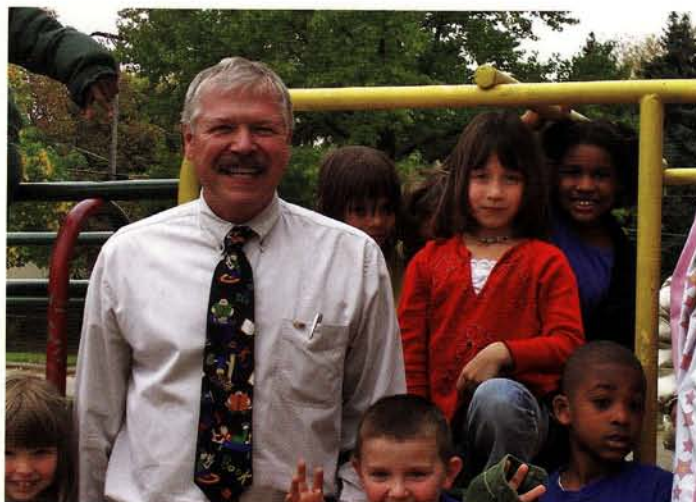
"We have modeled after a lot of districts and now there are just a handful of self-contained classrooms," Pritchard says. "What they are saying now is that one shoe does not fit everybody. Some kids will benefit from this because they will get back with their peers and that's a good thing, but I still see that we could have students who would benefit more from a more structured, self-contained room to better prepare them to move back into general education classrooms. It's a double-edged sword with a good side and a bad side."

Pritchard, 57, formerly taught for 10 years with emotionally and learning impaired children in the Muskegon school district before going into the private business sector. After 10 years in the remodeling business, he returned to teaching and signed on in with Grand Rapids Public Schools in 1991, where he has been ever since.

"You reach those little epiphanies in life, and I really missed working with students," Pritchard said. "After being in business, I thought there was something else I needed to do. I decided I wanted to go back into teaching. I've enjoyed it and it has been great. It's not difficult to come to work, because I enjoy what I do."

At Kent Hills, Pritchard has worked with the Grand Rapids Foundation to procure grants for science projects and hands-on learning experiences for students with special needs.

"The foundation has been a blessing for public schools around this area," he said.



Gary Pritchard watches over students on the playground at Kent Hills Elementary School in Grand Rapids.

For a gardening project, math and science lessons were incorporated. In turn, Pritchard's students have participated in service learning projects such as helping elderly neighbors with yard work.

"It's amazing the things we do on a daily basis can all go back into the learning curriculum while giving the kids hands-on experience they certainly need," Pritchard said. "Service learning is definitely part of it."

Pritchard said that inclusion is the ultimate goal of special education programs and resource assistance.

"For children who have been on the journey through special education, if they are at that point where they are able to make that next step and move on, it's a great thing because it builds their confidence and they have the tools to be successful," Pritchard said. "If you take a child that has been identified for special needs on down the line, it becomes more challenging for them to go back into general education setting."

"Early on is where kids need the most support, and the elementary level is the place you really need to reach these kids so they will have the skills they need once they move on to middle school and beyond."

Adopt-A-District Enters Second Year

The College of Education has taken North Godwin Elementary under its wing as the Adopt-A-District program enters its second year.

Allendale Public Schools was the first district to participate in the program. That partnership — which provided differentiation workshops and hands-on expertise by volunteer students and faculty — concluded in June with Jacqueline Melin and Doug Busman hosting a teacher workshop.

This year, North Godwin Elementary was selected from six proposals that were submitted.

"We decided to open the adoption up to individual schools this year to better focus on learning needs of students and work more closely with their teachers," said Amy Moore of the College of Education's Community Outreach Office.

Goals for this year's program are centered on improvement of student writing skills by providing information to teachers regarding strategies and methods.

Small group instruction and faculty workshops on classroom strategies are being planned.

ED 200 students volunteer to work with the district as part of their 25 service hours required by the College of Education. The volunteers are being assigned to classes by North Godwin Elementary Principal Arelis Diaz and will experience various classroom tasks, including reading to groups of students, assisting with math problems, facilitating science projects and helping students with spelling and reading.

College of Education faculty members are also offered opportunities to volunteer.

"We are really excited about it," Diaz said. "The one-on-one interaction will really help our students with their reading and mathematics

skills. It's a great program to be involved in."

During the winter semester, the College of Education will conduct a faculty workshop for the school.



North Godwin Elementary Principal Arelis Diaz has students excited about the partnership with the GVSU College of Education.