

# Teacher 2 Teacher



## Sharing with the Community

Katie McKay

The first step in Katie McKay's plan was to walk the three blocks from Becker Elementary School, where she teaches 4th grade, to Café Caffeine, a local coffee shop, and ask if they would be willing to host a reading by her students. McKay had watched an influx of white middle-class families move into the largely Latino and African-American neighborhood in central Austin where Becker Elementary is located, but most did not send their children to Becker. In addition, Becker's low academic rating had made it vulnerable to closure. The changes in the neighborhood and threat of closure helped persuade McKay that organizing her students to do community presentations would showcase their creativity and help the school stay open.

The coffee shop owner responded enthusiastically to her proposal. That year, McKay had done projects with the students focusing on issues such as racism, sexism and classism. Students had written memoirs, biographies, poetry, comic strips and personal narratives, and McKay gave them the option to share any piece they'd written that year.

The first performance went well, but McKay decided it was a shame to wait until the end of the school year to share the students' writing because they had little time to practice their presentation skills. The following year McKay orga-

nized community presentations every quarter. This time, the entire school was invited to provide pieces of writing focusing on the theme "positive identity" to post on the walls of the coffee shop.

"I did a theme of positive identity, and they wrote memoirs and created posters with pictures and things, but what they read were these 'Wordles' they created," she said. "They're cool looking, they're fast and easy...and they helped with building community in the classroom."

Wordle.net is a website that allows users to create "word clouds" or graphic images from text. The cloud can take on different shapes. The more frequently a word appears in a given text, the larger the word appears in the generated cloud. In the first couple of weeks of the school year the students were asked to write down their parents' responses to the question, "What are some positive words you think identify me or describe me?"

McKay used a similar technique in the classroom. Only this time, index cards with the names of each student were sent around the classroom allowing their peers to write down a few words they associated with that student. Then students added words they thought best described themselves. The three lists of words were taken to the school's computer lab where everyone created

their own personal Wordle. Later, each student mounted his or her Wordle on colorful paper and either read it aloud or used it as a backdrop behind the stage.

Parents were invited to come after school to the computer lab where their children taught them how to create Wordles. Some of the Wordles were bilingual and sometimes a parent would even create one for another parent who wasn't there. McKay found the sessions inspiring, watching students help their parent type or over-hearing comments like, "Mom I think you're responsible," and "I think you're beautiful."

One performance drew more than 80 audience members to the café. Before the reading, McKay passed out little pieces of brightly colored paper and asked audience members to write notes to the authors. "It was really exciting for them to feel like their stories were heard and their work was appreciated," said McKay.

Back in the classroom students also wrote reflections focusing on what they thought the community had learned about them or what they had learned about each other. McKay said the exercise helped students see the worth of their writing. One 4th grader, known for often "pushing boundaries," wrote, "People learned that I'm not a bad kid. I'm a writer!"

