

## Colleagues

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Erica R. Hamilton  
*Grand Valley State University*

Michael Greenlund  
*Grand Valley State University*

Nicholas Schweitzer  
*Grand Valley State University*

Emily Siriano  
*Grand Valley State University*

Andrew R. Sparks  
*Grand Valley State University*

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# Learning to Teach in a Public Museum School

By Erica R. Hamilton, GVSU Faculty; Michael Greenlund, Nicholas Schweitzer, Emily Siriano, and Andrew R. Sparks, GVSU Students

Schools are one of the best places to learn about education, which is why school partnerships are an essential component of Grand Valley State University's College of Education (COE). These valuable partnerships exist with rural, suburban, and urban school districts throughout the state of Michigan, including Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS).

Photography: Museum Bears by Jef Fisher (Flickr)



In the fall of 2015, the Grand Rapids Public Museum School (GRPMS) opened its doors, enrolling 60 sixth graders. Each year, the GRPMS will continue to add one grade until it is a fully functioning sixth through twelfth grade school. A collaborative effort between the GRPMS and GVSU's COE established a pilot partnership to connect undergraduate pre-service teachers through GVSU education classes with sixth grade students at the GRPMS.

One partnership connects the GRPMS students with GVSU secondary students enrolled in Dr. Erica Hamilton's EDR 321, an undergraduate content area literacy course. Hamilton's EDR 321 students become "mentors" and spend an hour each week out of their three-hour class to work with small groups of sixth graders onsite at the GRPMS.

These sixth graders, who are referred to as "musees," and their GVSU mentors compose what have become known

as "M&M groups". The M&M groups provide additional support for sixth graders' literacy development and learning. This unique placement experience in Hamilton's class also serves to extend GVSU mentors' understanding of adolescent literacy as it connects to place-based education (PBE) and project based learning (PBL).

During the second year of this pilot project, which took place during the 2016-2017 academic year, it is clear that this

partnership supports both GVSU and GRPMS students' learning. However, the success of this developing partnership is best measured by those directly involved in it, as evidenced by four students in Hamilton's Fall 2016 EDR 321 who participated in this university-school partnership. Here are their stories.

## Michael Greenlund

Throughout the fall semester, I had the opportunity to learn in and through the Grand Rapids Public Museum School (GRPMS). This partnership with Grand Valley led to the expansion of my understanding concerning education and pedagogies used in the classroom. Being at the GRPMS each week was a tangible, hands-on learning experience, and I now realize that one way to gain literacy skills is through place-based education (PBE) and project based learning (PBL).

Throughout my time at the GRPMS, I had the opportunity to learn and experience how PBE and PBL look “on paper” and in the sixth grade students’ “classrooms,” which included the Grand Rapids Public Museum School, the museum itself, and the surrounding Grand Rapids community. GRPMS students used museum artifacts, local rivers, and parts of the city as their learning environment. As a mentor, I observed students wrestle with real world problems and share their learning with authentic audiences beyond their classroom walls. This proved to me that it is possible to support students’ literacy development and engage their learning in ways that are meaningful and connected to the world in which they live. This is the kind of teaching and learning environment I now hope to foster in my own classroom.

## Nicholas Schweitzer

My experiences at the GRPMS have definitely allowed me to grow and develop as an educator. As a secondary preservice teacher with a mathematics major with a psychology minor, I learned a plethora of pedagogy and practices in my undergraduate education courses that I was finally able to put into practice when I began working in the GRPMS classroom. This university-school partnership gave me a chance to see and experience a school setting designed to connect students with opportunities to learn within and beyond their classroom.

Of the many lessons I learned as part of this partnership with the GRPMS—some of which came from the sixth

grade museums themselves—the one that sticks out to me most has to be that a traditional classroom experience is not the only way for students to experience and learn in school. Being able to see both place-based education (PBE)

and project based learning (PBL) in action expanded my “education horizons” in new, meaningful ways. Moving students toward visible and active thinking to learn concepts as a pedagogical method was not new to me. However, the use of PBE and PBL models and being involved in its implementation as part of my work as a mentor at the GRPMS showed me that all the pedagogical theory I had been learning through my coursework at GVSU could be carried out effectively in both whole-class and small-group settings. As a result of facilitating small-group sessions (i.e., M&M groups) I learned a lot about supporting students’ learning in small groups

and I will definitely keep these lessons in mind throughout my teaching career.

## Emily Siriano

Being an earth science major with minors in biology and chemistry, plus an integrated science endorsement, I have done many hours of middle school tutoring. This one-on-one work was great, but it did not directly prepare me for working with small and whole groups in the classroom. Working with my M&M groups at the GRPMS strengthened my abilities to teach and lead in ways I never thought it would. For example, when working with my M&M group, I had opportunities to think about and implement



Photography by Erica Hamilton

classroom management, leadership, quick decision-making, planning, time management, and supporting my students' learning in purposeful and respectful ways. The M&M groups were great practice for these skills, as we often had multiple tasks each meeting and each student had their own set of needs.

The reason I chose science education over other subjects is my love of the Earth and my desire to share and spread that passion with students and spark an interest in STEM-related fields. I have come to recognize place-based education (PBE) is a great way to bring the science of our own communities to life. Working with the GRPMS, I was able to see PBE first-hand. It was amazing to see how GRPMS connected with its community. For example, the Grand Rapids Public Library functions as their school's library and the city of Grand Rapids functions as their classroom to explore. Hearing and reading about PBL and PBE is great, but seeing it in action and being a part of it was incredible. I learned remarkably more by being put in the middle of it all through this partnership. Bringing pedagogy to life and seeing PBE and PBL in action have been incredibly beneficial for me as a preservice teacher. This partnership has inspired me to be an even better educator and mentor to my future students and it provided me with tools and skills to do so.

### Andrew R. Sparks

I valued my experiences through the GVSU and GRPMS partnership because I was able to learn about and put into practice some methods I had never been exposed to before. Prior to participating in this partnership, I was unfamiliar with PBE and PBL. The exposure to PBE and PBL was eye-opening, but what was especially powerful was actually participating in PBE and PBL. For example, in October the museums completed a short story assignment about a



fictitious character they created. During one of our M&M group meetings, one of my sixth grade students shared a draft of his writing. In giving feedback to this student, I asked this musee to develop and include a short timeline to help the reader understand the sequence of events outlined in his writing. In our group conversation, though, it became clear that my museums were not very familiar with the idea of a timeline. This sparked an impromptu trip to an exhibit in the museum, which presents a timeline of the life of a President of the United States, complete with artifacts.

As we stood there reviewing and discussing this exhibit, I worked to help my museums see how the style, language, and depiction of the artifacts in the exhibit helped the observer understand the significant changes over time. This led to a conversation about how events and ideas are represented in a simple linear model, which we often call a timeline. Before this experience I never thought about how a museum exhibit focused on a president could help

a sixth grade student develop as a writer. But it did. I have come to understand that expanding the classroom beyond traditional school walls gives students and their teachers opportunities to make more connections, including using real-world artifacts to enhance students' learning.

### Conclusion

This is just one of the many partnerships GVSU's College of Education has with local schools. As the stories from Michael, Nick, Emily, and Andy illustrate, partnerships such as this one play an invaluable role in supporting learning for preservice teachers and the K-12 students they serve. All four received teaching placements upon graduation. Michael is now teaching at Wayland Union High School in Wayland, Michigan; Nicholas is at Holland High School in Holland, Michigan; Emily is at Union High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Andrew is at Success Virtual Learning Centers in Stanton, Michigan.