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## Taking Up the Work: Snapshots of Disciplinary Literacy Instruction, Part II

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# Taking Up the Work: Snapshots of Disciplinary Literacy Instruction, Part II

by Laura Gabrion and Jenelle Williams



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This article is part of a series devoted to unpacking disciplinary literacy instructional practices for educators at all levels. While the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom* have been written with secondary educators in mind (and are available on the Literacy Essentials website: [literacyessentials.org](http://literacyessentials.org)), literacy researchers throughout the state continue to encourage elements of disciplinary literacy instruction in pre-kindergarten and elementary classrooms, especially when considering the Michigan Revised Teacher Certification Structure. Because pre-service teachers can now select from five overlapping grade bands (Birth-K, PreK-3, 3-6, 5-9, and 9-12), “we find ourselves at an optimal time to re-examine expectations for both educator preparation coursework and teachers’ instructional practice” (Williams & Gabrion, 2022). Throughout this series, we will examine disciplinary literacy instruction in several content areas as well as discuss the critical role that literacy and instructional coaches play in supporting the implementation of disciplinary literacy instructional practices.

## **Ongoing and Intentional Professional Learning**

In Part I of this series (in *MRJ* 54:3), we offered some ideas for starting and sustaining this work in the English Language Arts classroom; a critical first step

since February 2020 has been to engage in the state-wide professional learning opportunities offered by the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force (DLTF). To date, approximately 860 educators have participated in our “Introductory Institute,” and many of those same educators have engaged in our “Deeper Dive” series. Both the “Introductory Institutes” and the “Deeper Dive” series have provided multiple entry points for those interested in implementing the Disciplinary Literacy Essentials (DLEs) in their buildings and classrooms.

However, as noted in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Policy Research Brief entitled “Literacies of Disciplines” (2011), “[i]mplementing literacies of disciplines will require significant attention to professional development for teachers.” Furthermore, effective professional development, as described in a literature review by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), should have several key characteristics. It needs to be focused on content, involve active and collaborative learning, use models of effective practice, include coaching and expert support, provide opportunities for feedback and reflection, and be of sustained duration. As such, “[t]he professional development that will provide teachers with the resources and strategies necessary to support students in acquiring plural literacies needs to be sustained and systematic [...and center] communities

of practice” (NCTE, 2011). In order to provide ongoing and tailored support, outgrowths of the DLTF’s large scale professional development offerings have emerged at various ISDs throughout the state. In this article, Part II of our “Snapshot” series, we will take a look at four intermediate school districts (ISDs) and their targeted approach to starting—and sustaining—disciplinary literacy instruction with teachers in their region through a “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) model.

### **Equity Based Disciplinary Literacies at Washtenaw ISD**

Melissa Brooks-Yip, Coordinator of Instruction at Washtenaw ISD, formed a network of teachers, coaches, and administrators to explore disciplinary literacy and disciplinary literacy instructional practices from an equity lens. Evolving over the past several years, the group’s work began with Dr. Elizabeth Moje, one of the key researchers behind the development of the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom*, followed by focused professional learning. The group had also formed a partnership with faculty at Eastern Michigan University. From there, the Equity Based Disciplinary Literacies (EBDL) network was born. “EBDL is a new collaborative for educators focused on creating disciplinary literacy instruction that is culturally responsive, equity-driven, and identity affirming for themselves and for their students” (M. Brooks-Yip, personal communication, May 17, 2022). Together, the group “built [their] foundational understandings of equity and literacy through the creation of [their] own personal [syllabi] that included relevant readings from [their fields], interviews with community members and experts in the disciplines, and collaborations between secondary classroom teachers and EMU professors” (M. Brooks-Yip, personal communication, May 17, 2022). Some of the relevant readings included *Textured Teaching: A Framework for Culturally Sustaining Practices* (Germán, 2021), *The Civically Engaged Classroom: Reading, Writing, and Speaking for Change* (Ehrenworth et al., 2020), and *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (Muhammad, 2020). One participant noted,

I’m very grateful to have been partnered with an EMU professor and a Washtenaw Technical Middle College partner. We’ve had great conversations about helping students adjust back to in-person learning, how high school teachers can best prepare our students for higher ed, and how teachers at all levels can better serve our students with culturally responsive teaching in disciplinary literacy. We’ve also discussed how the concept of citizenship can be taught in different social studies fields. I’m thinking through changes to my World History curriculum based on these conversations. They were also both incredibly kind and supportive. Working with them was a bright spot in an otherwise very difficult year. (personal communication, n.d.)

With the ultimate goal of providing teachers with real world applications of disciplinary literacy for their students, Figure 1 illustrates a planning guide from one of the professional learning sessions, scaffolding the purposeful way participants applied their learning as they planned for implementation.

### **Monroe County Middle College at Monroe ISD**

Teachers from Monroe County Middle College (MCMC) worked with consultants from the Monroe ISD to identify disciplinary literacy “as an opportunity for improving teaching and learning for all students, all teachers, and all courses” (K. Berry, personal communication, May 17, 2022). Because MCMC only offers courses in the four core subjects (ELA, mathematics, science, social studies), educators could engage in deep study of their content area practices in the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom*. An integral part of our DLTF, Kathy Berry, Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment at Monroe ISD, sought to apply one very important lesson we gleaned from participants in our statewide professional learning offerings: focus on a smaller number of DLEs and allocate greater time for reflection and discussion—both inter- and intra-disciplinary. Thus, after being given an overview of the DLEs, teachers chose two Essential Practices to focus upon for the first year of a five-year plan that would

Figure 1

*Equity-Based Disciplinary Literacy: Charting Reality Pedagogies*

Look at the civically engaged practices in the first column and consider how they might relate to your subject-specific disciplinary literacy essentials. Then, consider how that connection sparks ideas for your own teaching for civic engagement in reference to *The Civically Engaged Classroom* (2020). It might also be helpful to consider some of the literacies we discussed in *Glimmer of Hope* (2018). This is your copy, so feel free to take notes directly on this document.

Civically Engaged Practices	Connection to General Essentials	Connection to Discipline-Specific Essentials	Sparks for Your Own Teaching
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show students what's possible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Essential 1:</b> Problem-Based Instruction</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan for classroom-based social action by identifying an issue that's important to students and guide them to consider audience and modalities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Essential 2:</b> Diverse Texts and Abundant Reading Opportunities</li> <li><b>Essential 5:</b> Using a Variety of Discussion Methods Around Complex Texts</li> <li><b>Essential 6:</b> Opportunities for Instruction in Speaking in Listening</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop social networks that extend into the surrounding community, including families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Essential 1:</b> Problem-Based Instruction</li> <li><b>Essential 9:</b> Community Networking to Connect With Students' Funds of Knowledge</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make a plan that plays to students' strengths.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Essential 3:</b> Intentional Standards-Aligned Instruction in Disciplinary Reading</li> <li><b>Essential 4:</b> Intentional Standards-Aligned Instruction in Disciplinary Writing</li> <li><b>Essential 8:</b> Ongoing Observation of Students' Academic Language and Literacy</li> </ul>		

address all ten of the DLEs. Collectively, the MCMC teachers chose to focus on DLE #2 (Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities) and DLE #7 (Intentional efforts to build vocabulary). Professional learning throughout the year included full-day, half-day, and 75-minute sessions that involved both whole and small group options. The small group options honored the teachers' desire for "disciplinary conversations" that would guide their work (K. Berry, personal communication, May 17, 2022). In addition, resources were easily accessible to teachers in a shared Google Drive.

When reflecting on the growth of the group, Kathy Berry noted, "Principal leadership here is key" (personal communication, May 17, 2022). This is reinforced within *The Essential School-Wide Practices in Disciplinary Literacy: Grades 6 to 12*, which emphasize the importance of developing a leadership team "with the guidance and support of the lead administrator" (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2020). The in-depth study of DLE #2 and #7 and ongoing support from the principal have resulted in "staff [who] are much more conversant with disciplinary literacy, and they have clear look-fors around DLE #2 for teachers and for students" (K. Berry, personal communication, May 17, 2022).

### **Connecting DLEs with Professional Learning Protocols at Heritage Southwest ISD**

At the Heritage Southwest ISD, educators from Edwardsburg, Marcellus, and Dowagiac school districts sought ways to increase rigor and engagement; the DLEs were a perfect fit. Consultants facilitated "two in-person full-day [professional learning events] as an introduction to the DLEs in the fall" (M. Burke, personal communication, May 18, 2022). Like the teachers in Monroe, two DLEs became the central focus: DLE #1 (Problem-based instruction) and DLE #5 (Higher-order discussion). After the initial kick-off, learning continued bi-monthly throughout the year. Using the DLEs as a foundation, the group explored instructional strategies, such as the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) and Productive Talk (M. Burke, personal communication, May 18, 2022). Important takeaways from a year of learning included

"the relevancy of discourse and how it really connects to reading and writing in any content area [and how] focusing on the problem [...] sets the stage for engagement into learning. [Teachers] also were starting to see how productive talk can be a building-district wide initiative" (M. Burke, personal communication, May 18, 2022).

### **Teaching Students to Ask Their Own Questions at the St. Clair County RESA**

As a final example, educators from Algonac Community Schools, Capac Community Schools, East China School District, Marysville Public Schools, Riverview East High School, and Yale Public Schools attended a professional learning series offered by the St. Clair County RESA. Much like the professional learning offered in Washtenaw, Monroe, and Southwestern Michigan, consultants in St. Clair used a network approach. "Participants engaged in learning about the Essentials and targeted strategies to use in their classrooms. Between sessions they implemented at least one strategy learned and then shared their experiences with the group" (M. Turrell, personal communication, May 23, 2022). In addition to exploring the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom*, participants engaged in a book study using *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (Rothstein & Santana, 2011). While most of the participants had little prior knowledge of the DLEs, routine reflection, captured in a Padlet, revealed both growth and appreciation. One teacher commented,

I truly found everything to be of value! I really loved the instructional strategies and the fact that they were rolled out in a manner that allowed us to get a chance to "try them out" before giving us more strategies. I liked being able to communicate and synthesize what we were learning, share what we tried, and [have] an opportunity to hear other's experiences in our break-outs. I liked how each meeting left my head spinning with ideas and left me feeling "excited" to get back to the classroom to try all these great tools. (personal communication, n.d.)

Perhaps most telling, all of the participants committed to a second year to deepen their own knowledge of the DLEs with the aim of strategic implementation.

### Overarching Themes to Ground Future Learning

Learning is undoubtedly a social act (Vygotsky, 1978), and because of this, we understand that teachers—like the students they teach—need regular, collaborative time to learn, converse, and reflect with colleagues in an effort to improve pedagogy, which has a direct impact upon student achievement (Jenkins, 2018). Over the course of the past two years, DLTF members have kept several themes at the forefront of both statewide and regional professional learning. In fact, a small group of DLTF members including Co-Chair Jenelle Williams, Darin Stockdill, Mary Starr, and Laura Gabrion presented these themes at the 71st Annual Literacy Research Association Conference in December 2021.

1. Less is more. It is essential to slow down and chunk content in ways aligned with teachers' planning processes.
2. Teachers need time to discuss their learning with colleagues, and protocols can help those conversations be more productive.
3. Intentionally curated resources and practical examples are key.
4. Reflection time is crucial.
5. When given time and support, teachers will come back to keep learning, so repeated opportunities to engage with the content in new ways is important. (Stockdill et al., 2021)

As the four cases outlined above illustrate, when applied, these themes can drive meaningful and sustained professional growth that will have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

In the year ahead, the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force will continue to release self-paced courses through the EduPaths virtual learning platform. Because we value a collaborative approach, we have “designed each course in the hope that partnerships or teams of educators engage in the content together” (Gabrion et al., 2022).

In addition, individual ISDs and RESAs will be offering regionalized professional learning, much like the four scenarios described above. Regardless of how and where educators engage in learning centered on disciplinary literacy and the DLEs, inherently “we are part of a wider community that is committed to the right work for students” (Williams, 2022).

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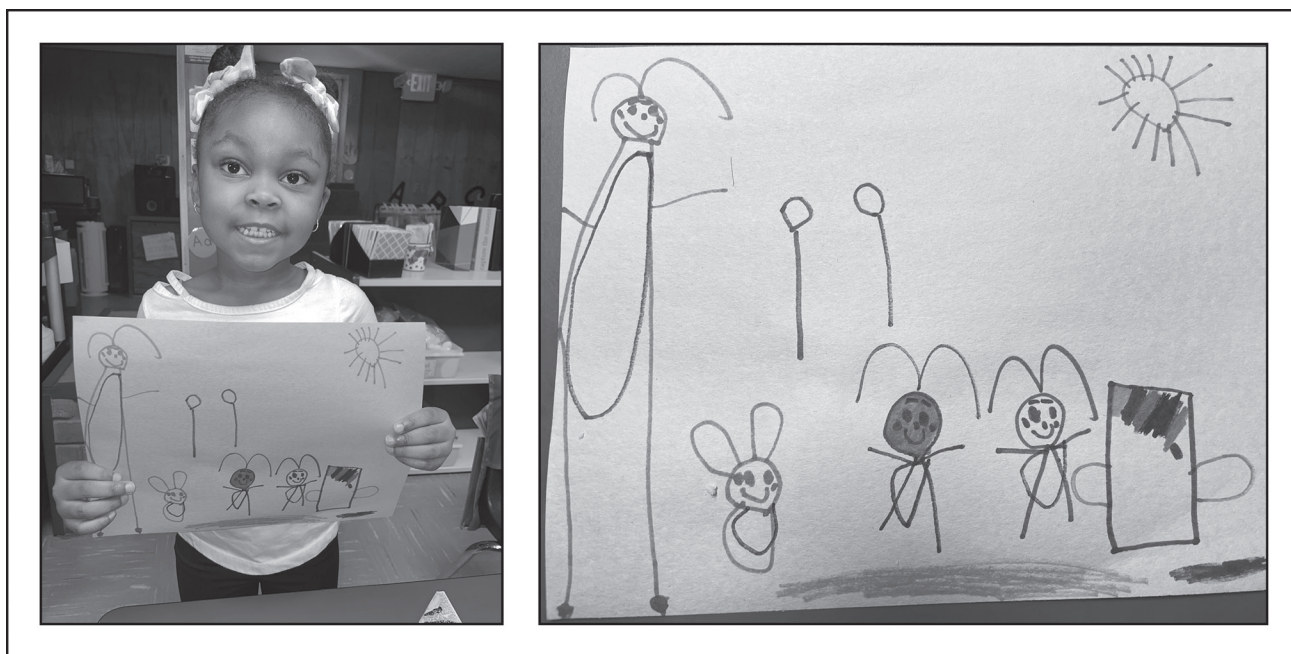
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### Author Biographies

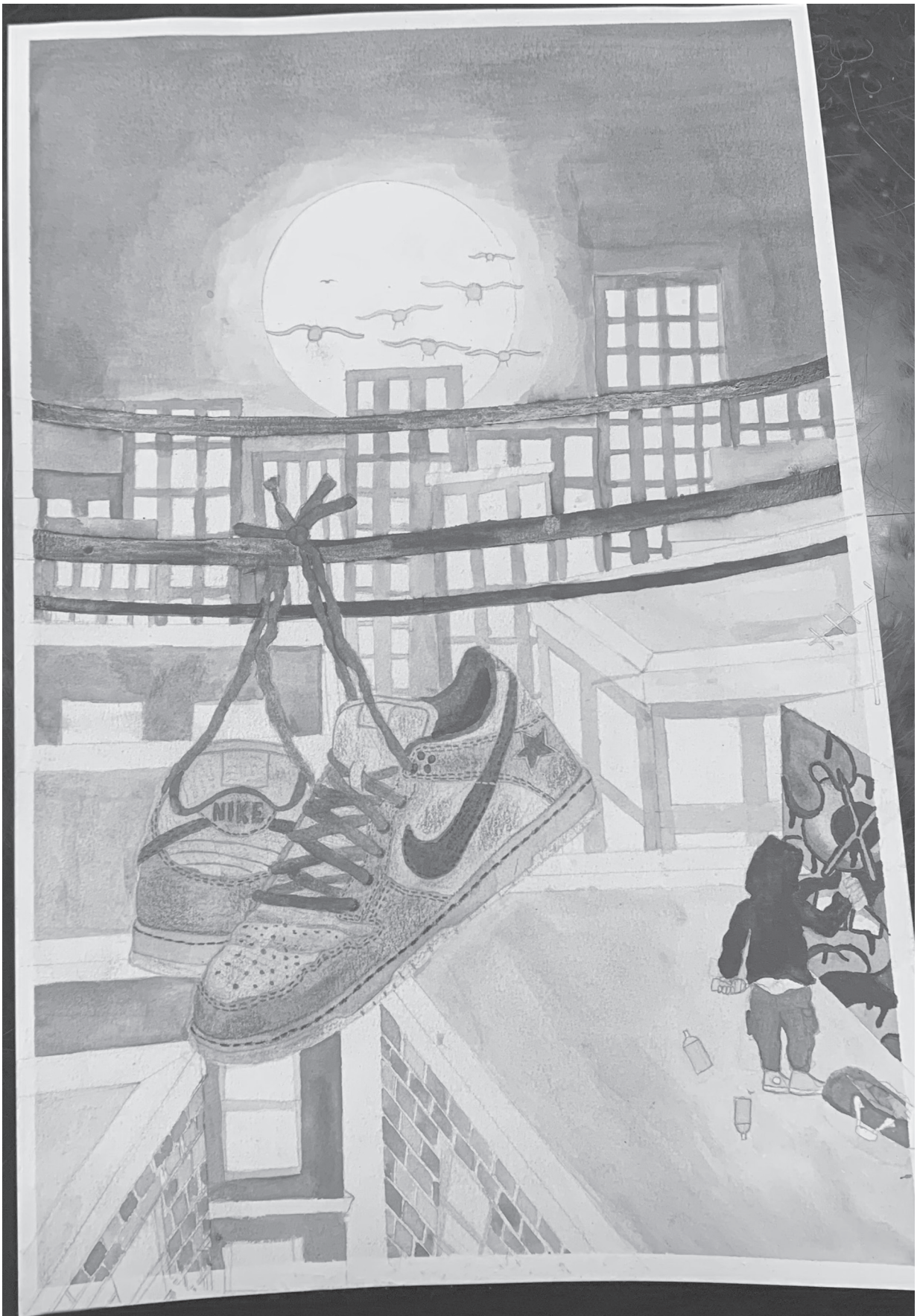
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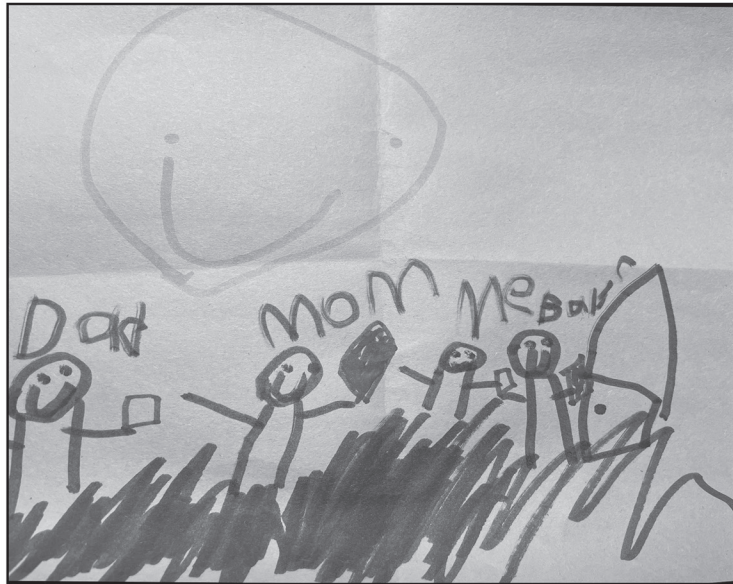
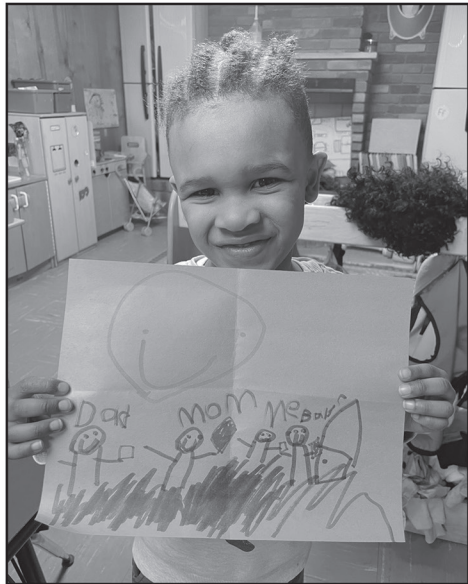


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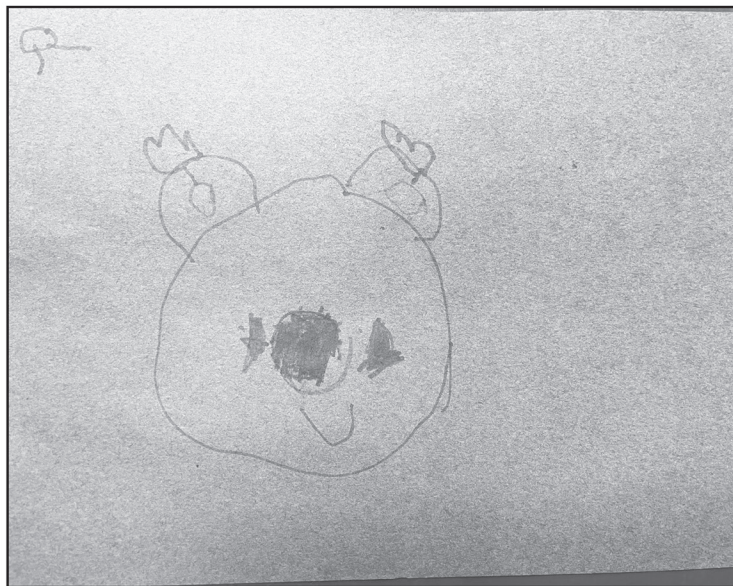
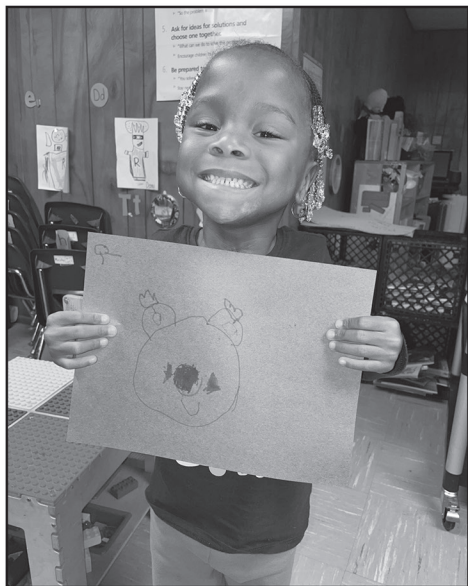


“City” created by Dontez Tinsley, a 12th grade student at Garden City High School in Garden City.





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