



Mansfield Middle School students Addison Rocha and Artemis Willis work on play boxes they recently built for kindergartners. Courtesy of Mansfield Public Schools

MMS students create fun way to play, learn

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MANSFIELD — Through a partnership with Mansfield Middle School technology education teacher Robert Burrington, two Southeast Elementary School teachers are incorporating play into creative writing lessons.

Play boxes created by Burrington's eighth grade students were unveiled to kindergarten classes during Zoom calls late last month.

The reaction was overwhelming.

"They didn't want to stop playing," said Kaye Jakan, the district's literacy consultant, who works with the kindergartners and students in other grades.

Each play box is a handmade, wooden box based on a specific theme.

For example, one of the boxes is based on a beach theme and

contains people, palm trees and sand. The kindergartners will use the boxes to come up with stories that they will then write sentences about.

Themes ranged widely, Burrington said, and included dinosaurs, the beach, fairies and a kingdom.

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"This is a nine-week course, so they had nine weeks to do this in," he said.

The project was initiated by Southeast kindergarten teachers Erika LaBella and Rebecca Robi-

chaud, who first spoke to Burrington about the project last year.

Jakan said the students will use the boxes to create stories.

LaBella and Robichaud got the idea from a blog post, "Writers Playshop," which was written by Katie Keiser.

The project was delayed by the

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Mansfield Middle School student Nigel Corraera works on play boxes that eighth graders recently built for kindergartners. Courtesy of Mansfield Public Schools

MMS 8th graders create a fun way to play and learn

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pandemic, however, and they reintroduced the project in the fall.

Jakan said the boxes exceeded their expectations.

"They're very well-made and just beautiful," she said.

Burrington said 42 boxes or so were delivered to the kindergartners.

He cut the wood and the students assembled the boxes, painted them and decorated them according to a specific theme.

Burrington spoke of the value of having such a partnership with students and staff from another school.

"It's a bond between the two schools," he said. "It's a bond not only between students and programs, but also teachers."

Burrington said he felt the eighth graders would develop more of a relationship with the kindergartners if they could meet in-person.

After piloting the proj-

ect successfully among Southeast kindergartners, the hope is to bring it to other kindergarten classes and other grades at other schools.

Eighth grader Serenit Young said it felt good to see the children excited about the boxes and "spread joy during the pandemic."

Her box was based on a kingdom theme that included princesses and princes.

"It was kind of hard at first because I didn't know what to pick," Young said, "I had a lot of ideas."

She said her box got a lot of "good compliments."

However, Young said she was disappointed to not be able to share the boxes with the kindergartners in-person as was initially planned.

Pandemic protocols made that impossible.

"I felt like it would have been better seeing real action from them," Young said.

Follow Michelle Warren on Twitter - @mwarrentc.