

Baltimore, Maryland

CURTIS BAY

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

'This curriculum unites the family.'

FROM THE outside, Curtis Bay Elementary School in the city of Baltimore has a somewhat bleak look to it—no fancy playground or well-tended soccer fields like one finds in the suburbs. The student population is diverse, but primarily white and primarily low income; 70 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch.

But walk inside Curtis Bay and the bleakness is re-



placed by the bustle of activity and enthusiasm and by beautiful displays of student work. The school introduced the Core Knowledge curriculum only a little more than a year ago, but already the change is palpable. In the pages

that follow, we hear from some of the voices at Curtis Bay.

*Inspired by a Core Knowledge conference, fifth-grade teacher **Paula Myers** introduced the idea of the Core Curriculum to Curtis Bay Elementary. Here she leads her class in a discussion of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.*

"I think that for a long time we've played down to children, we haven't given them rich materials to work with. In literature this year we did Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and at first when I looked through the book, I thought, 'Oh Dear.' It's a romantic comedy where you have couples falling in love with each other because of the magic potion that this one fellow puts in their eyes. And there are so many characters in it, I thought, 'Oh gee, I don't know if fifth grade is going to be able to handle this.' Well, they loved it. They loved it. They got a kick out of it and they understood it and, of course, we acted out part of it in a play, and then I got the children's classic version on video, which enhances it for them. We had already done background work on Shakespeare, the Elizabethan era, and English life during the Golden Age. The students had built cottages and castles and theaters. I overheard them

speaking in Shakespearean language: 'Doth thou want to go to lunch with me?'

"We're just now starting to get to the point in education where we should be, in terms of content, process, and dimensions of learning. I think this should have been done twenty years ago so that by now it would be refined. It seems that we are still having these discussions about what should be taught in each grade level and how we should do it. We need a national curriculum—they know the ways to teach reading, writing—it's like, 'Polish it up and get it done.'"



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"We have this little conversation about what I did at school, and it seems like I just go on and on and on, because we did so much stuff."

Editor: "I know you use a lot of other materials, too, but as a basic outline of what you're learning this year, you're using the book, *What Your 5th Grader Needs To Know*." I understand you took the book home and showed it to your parents? What did they think of it?"

Shannon: "They thought it was really good for 5th graders. My mom gave my teacher, Ms. Myers, a note asking how to buy one of these for herself, because my mom wants me to grow up and be rich and smart. And my dad said he'd like to have one of these books, too, because sometimes when he has troubles with my brother with his homework or something, he can help him. They want their own copy so they can read it and practice it over with us."

Editor: "And how about your parents, Kristina?"

Kristina: "My mom was really excited about that book, and she wanted to get a 6th-grade one for me to practice over the summer to get ready for 6th grade next year, and she wanted one for my brother, too—he's seven. She's really excited and she wanted me to learn more and work with the book a lot and she's really happy. She looked at it and she read some stuff and she was really into it, because it has so much information in it."

Shannon: "It's a little complicated but once you get used to it, it's not so hard. And it's very interesting."

Editor: "Does learning interesting stuff make you more excited about coming to school?"

Kristina & Shannon: "Yes!"

Kristina Baker
5th Grade

Shannon: "Even when I'm really really sick, I tell my mom I'm not staying home, I have to come to school. I want to learn. Last year I was really sick near Christmas time—it was almost time for Christmas break—remember, Krissy? And my mom said I was staying home. I said 'Mom I have to go to school...if you want me to grow up and be smart then I have to go to school and learn.' And she said okay and she called my grandma to drive me to school."

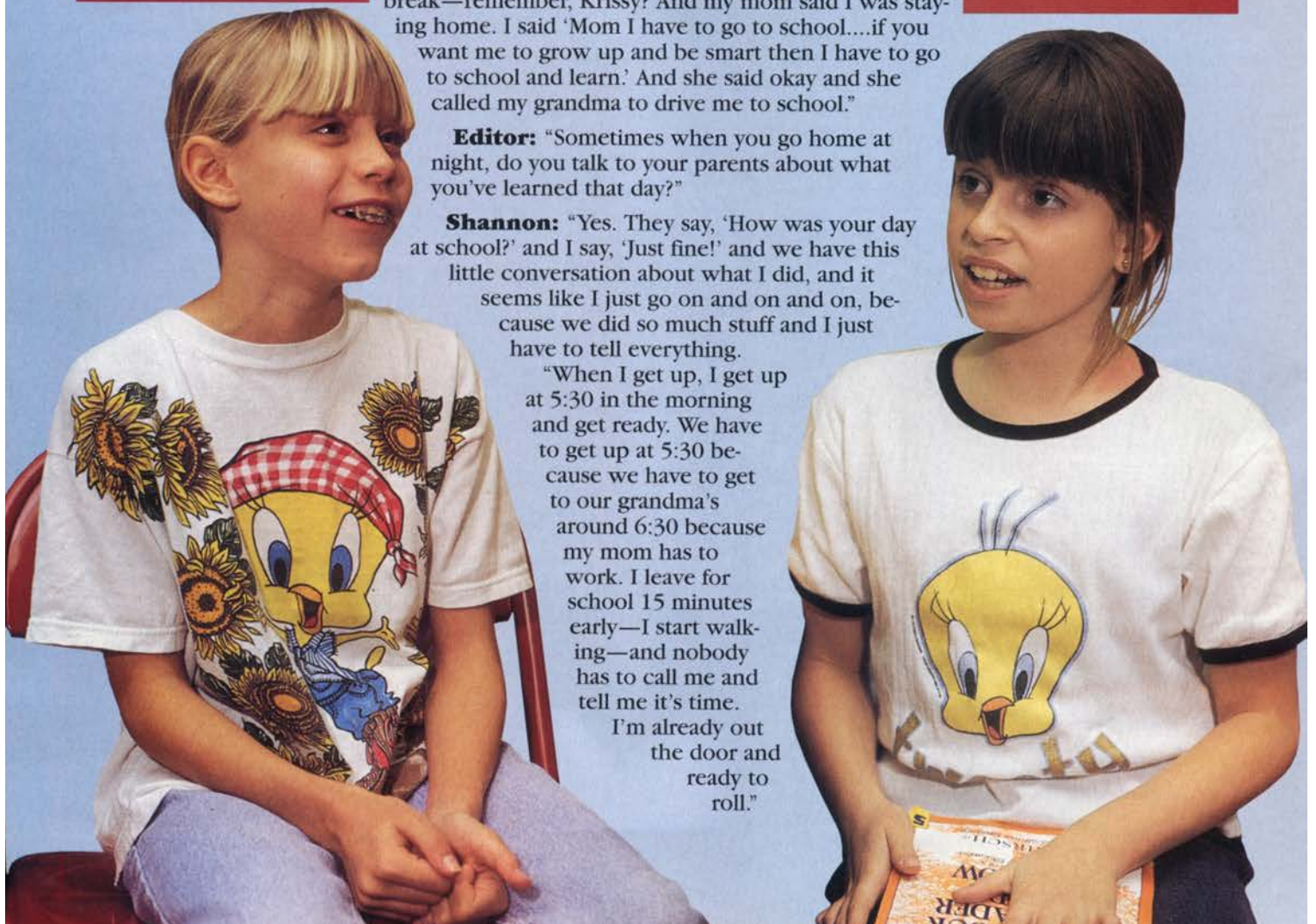
Editor: "Sometimes when you go home at night, do you talk to your parents about what you've learned that day?"

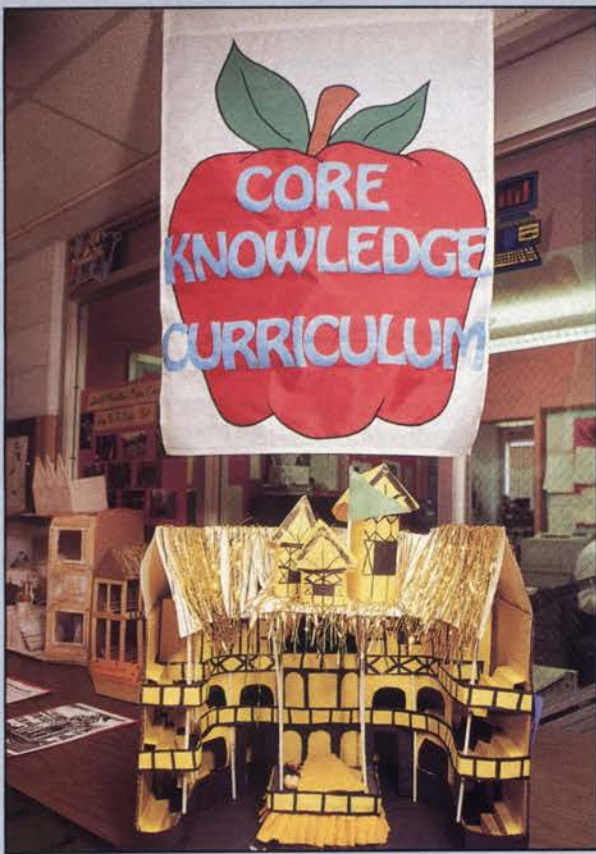
Shannon: "Yes. They say, 'How was your day at school?' and I say, 'Just fine!' and we have this little conversation about what I did, and it seems like I just go on and on and on, because we did so much stuff and I just have to tell everything."

"When I get up, I get up at 5:30 in the morning and get ready. We have to get up at 5:30 because we have to get to our grandma's around 6:30 because my mom has to work. I leave for school 15 minutes early—I start walking—and nobody has to call me and tell me it's time."

I'm already out the door and ready to roll."

Shannon Frock
5th Grade





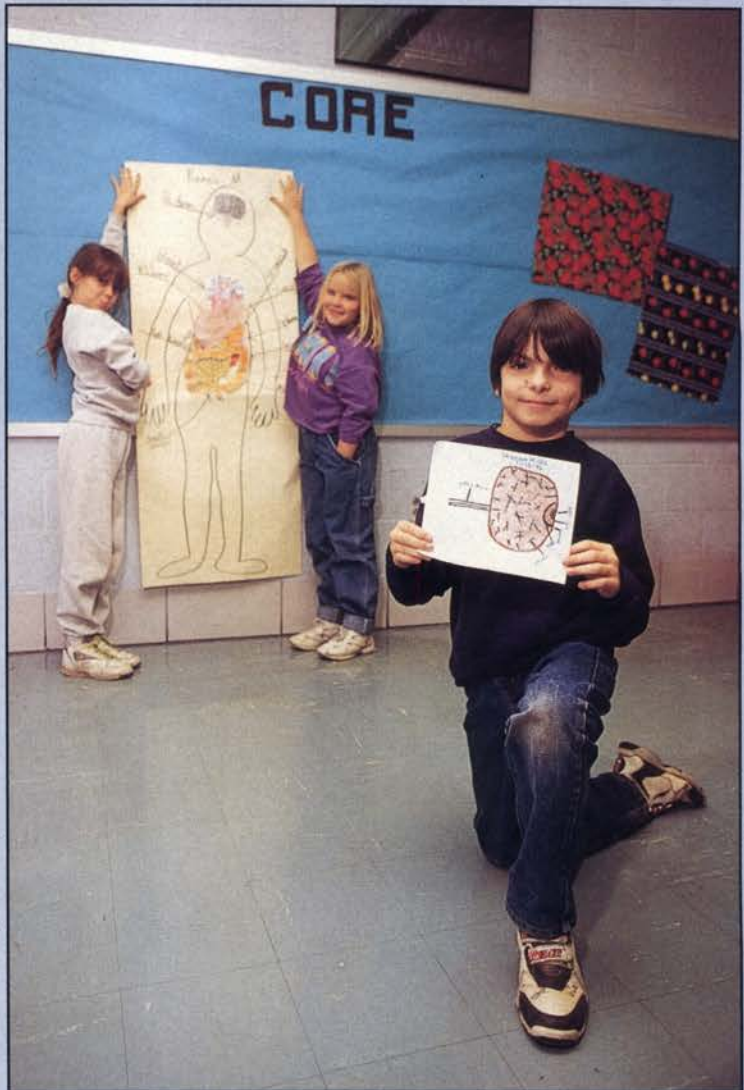
This Globe Theater was made by Dana Coker, Grade 5.

Ruth James, the librarian—who also manages the Core Knowledge Resource Room, teaches second graders about the Kwanzaa celebration.

“I love the Core Curriculum because it allows the teacher to be very creative. It allows the teacher to explore and share a wealth of information. And the content is fabulous! I can take these second graders and I can work with them on a level that may be what 4th and 5th graders would get if it were just a regular curriculum.”



Knowledge builds upon knowledge: In second grade, students receive an overview of the major parts and functions of the human body. Building on this in the third grade, they delve more deeply into the nervous system and how the human eyes and ears work. In the foreground, a third-grader displays a drawing of the parts of the eye.





A third-grader is anxious to add her voice.

Mary Minter, the principal

"The parents are very excited and much more involved in their children's education than they used to be. I recall one parent telling me that they were playing 'Jeopardy' and there was a question about the Great Lakes and her son, a kindergarten student, answered the question. I don't know if they asked what is the biggest lake or what, but he was able to yell out the answer. 'Now I know that has to be wrong, he doesn't know that,' she

thought to herself, and it turned out she was shocked that that child knew that answer and she had not a clue of what was the biggest lake. That type of thing, coming from a kindergarten student, really excites parents. And, as another example, the children are able to talk about the voyages that Columbus made. Before, they knew about Columbus, but they could not tell you the voyages he took, how he got where he was going, what route, what direction, what continent—that kind of detail. They know about the states, not just that this is Maryland or this is a particular state, but what's important in that particular state—what are the attributes. They can really get detailed about what is going on — not just a state on the map anymore.

"The children's attendance has also improved; they *want* to be here.

"Through our newsletter, we inform parents all the time of what we are doing and what the class is doing so they are kept abreast of what's going on. Also, the teacher sends home on a monthly basis a project that the child will be working on and gives parents ideas of things they can do to help the child get a stronger knowledge of what they're studying in that particular subject area.

"The students have more to say to their parents now about what they learned at school. They talk around the dinner table now. Usually you ask the child, 'How was school?' 'Fine.' That's it. There is usually no conversation. Now the children go home and really talk about all this because this is really interesting. Yes, it unites the family. If nothing else, this curriculum unites the family." □