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News Release

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Ison Springs Elementary School's unique 21st century classroom

“Tear down that wall!”

The iconic phrase that marked the end of the Cold War had significance at Ison Springs Elementary School a few years ago for two fifth grade teachers, Summer Mallory and Nick Thompson. While teaching in neighboring classrooms, they were approached by their principal, Sara White, with an unusual proposal to eliminate the dividing wall of their rooms and create a team-teaching environment in one large space.

“We took it and ran with it,” says Thompson, and they began to create what they now call the 21st Century Classroom.

To prepare, Mallory and Thompson visited other schools with similar programs. After reviewing and training in instructional strategies, they created a customized concept for their own approach. Since then, they have fine-tuned those strategies for the math, science and social studies classes they teach.

The project was underwritten by seed funding from a Fulton Education Foundation grant.

“Our goal,” says Mallory, “was to establish a nurturing environment to support inquiry-based learning, problem solving, and critical thinking, and to enhance student collaboration.”

Funds not only supported the wall removal but the purchase of wheeled chairs and tables for flexible seating configurations, shelving, and instructional materials to support the curriculum.

In keeping with Ison Springs' “Kindergarten to College” schoolwide theme, Mallory and Thompson created an innovative space with learning stations identified by various college and university flags.

What does a typical day in the 21st Century Classroom look like? The class gathers in the “lecture hall,” followed by group work at one of the “universities.” Students experience a variety of interactive learning techniques and location changes to keep things fresh. To make transitions fun, Thompson dances and plays upbeat, energizing music. Each learning area focuses on specific skill-building through games, technology and fluency. Students still do formative daily assessments and all work complies with Georgia standards, but they are encouraged to be creative and find their natural learning style. When better focus is needed, meditative or

classical music plays quietly. Rewards include regular high-fives, getting to shoot baskets in a sports arcade or wearing a superhero cape.

While student scores on the Georgia Milestones have begun to rise over the years since the class began, the most noticeable improvements, Thompson says, is increased positive attitudes towards attending school.

“Our students are more engaged in instructional activities and have become more collaborative, and notably, there are fewer behavioral concerns. Students are excited to move on to fifth grade because they know they can be a part of this unprecedented classroom experience.”

Photos attached.

(Photo Caption #1) Teacher Nick Thompson gazes up at the creative artwork, done by students, on the ceiling panels while students are taught by his co-teacher.

(Photo Caption #2) Nick Thompson cheers students on as they shoot baskets as rewards for meeting their goals

(Photo Caption #3) Teacher Summer Mallory supervises groups in their learning stations

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About the Fulton County School System. The Fulton County School System is the fourth largest school system in Georgia. More than 95,000 students attend 106 schools in the cities of Alpharetta, Chattahoochee Hills, College Park, East Point, Fairburn, Hapeville, Johns Creek, Milton, Mountain Park, Palmetto, Roswell, Sandy Springs, South Fulton and Union City.