COLLABORATIVE ENLIVES CHARTER SCHOOL CLASSES

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WATERBURY — Tiny trout began hatching in a fish-food foam-covered tank in the rear of Courtney Bauknecht’s science lab classroom at Brass City Charter School a few days ago.

Cricket scuttle over carrot bits in five small plastic terrariums. A row of plants grows in another terrarium. Above, Bauknecht plans to bring in tadpoles and butterflies.

The use of animals inside the classroom is a practice probably as old as the practice of teaching. Bauknecht does it more than most. Bauknecht is part of a three-year, $352,000 effort to upgrade science offerings and teaching styles at the fledgling charter school. She works for the Connecticut Science Center, which hires her services to the school four days a week, thanks to a grant from the Leverett Foundation.

"They’re trying to provide an intensive, and hands-on experience for our kids," Director Barbara Ragusa said of the Leverett Foundation.

Bauknecht was recently hired for a similar job at a charter school in Waterbury. It started with students in pre-kindergarten through first grade. This year it added second grade, for a total of 150 students. The plan is to continue adding one grade each year until it runs through eighth. The school day is longer and the program different from public schools. Children are admitted by lottery.

At 2 p.m. Wednesday, Bauknecht greeted an incoming class of kindergarten students dressed in the gray uniform, street-suits of the school. It’s gym day. She reminded them to respect themselves, each other and their “stuff.”

They’re especially important today because our stuff are living organisms," Bauknecht said.

There was a short talk covering things that organisms need, a reminder of recent work and an assurance to one Savage that yes, they will absolutely visit with the fish that period.

Then the children were turned loose to press their faces close to the walls of the cricket terrariums, and carefully peek — one at a time — at the insect crow. Students wrote and drew observations in small notebooks. There were many questions, but Bauknecht made children work for the answers.

"Why do you think they have to stay in water?" she asked one little boy.

"Because they’re babies!" answered Messiah Davis.

"Baby who?" Bauknecht responded. "I’ll let you think about that.

This style of teaching, known as "inquiry," is gaining popularity among educators. It’s written into evolving education standards for lessons in various subjects.

"The great thing about this is you can use it in all the subject areas," said Lord Corbett, the primary teacher for the group of 14 kindergarten students.

The students were engrossed. Being from the city, none don’t get much contact with nature, explained Roggius, so a visit to the science lab is a big treat.

Corbett and other Brass City teachers spent seven days at the Connecticut Science Center, learning the “notebooking” and inquiry-based teaching methods. These will be more training in the coming summer. Corbett’s students get three, 45-minute science lessons each week. Two are held in her classroom and one in Bauknecht’s science lab.

As the year progresses, the classroom teachers like Corbett will increasingly take the lead, while Bauknecht steers into a coaching role.

“We are building out a sustainable science program for the school,” Bauknecht said.