

THE SPACE WE CREATE

The Kohelet Prize for Learning Enviroment
2017-2018



Amy Sroka - 4th grade

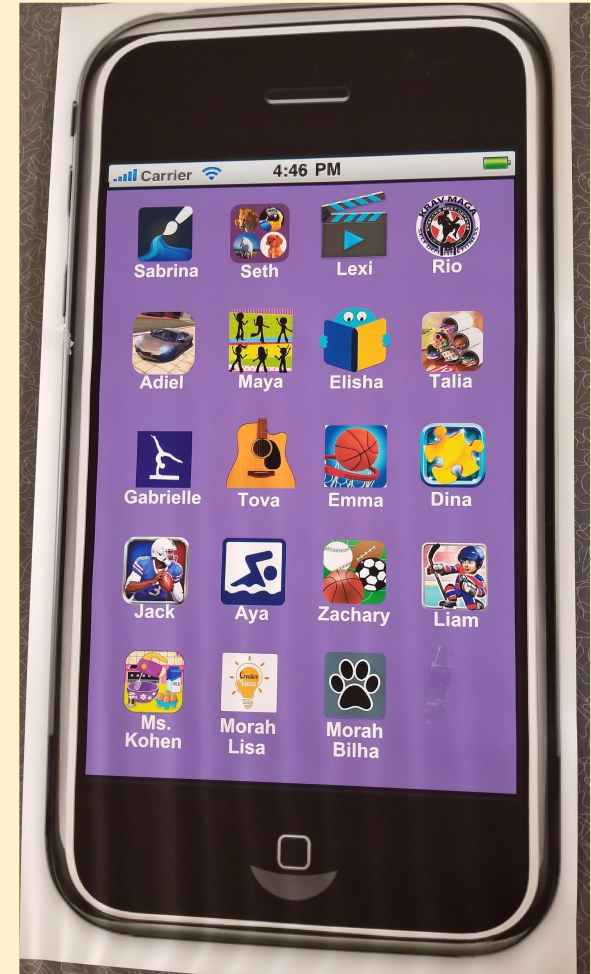


"I never teach my pupils. I only provide conditions in which they can learn."
-- Albert Einstein

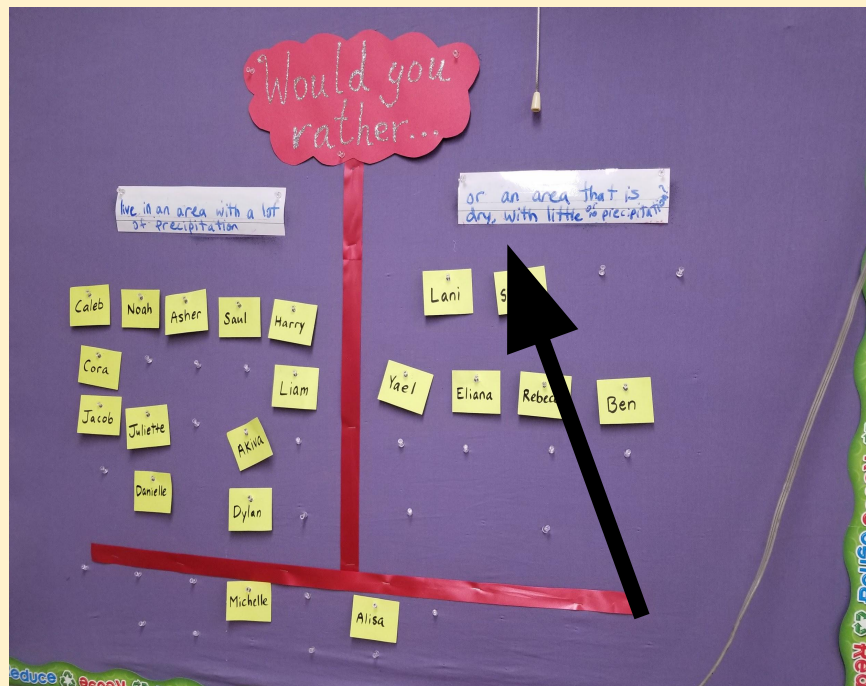
Smartphone Welcome!

- Parent Partnership: Before school started, I asked parents to suggest a talent, skill or favorite hobby of their child. I made early connections with parents and gained valuable information about the children and their interests.
- In previous years I had a poster on the door greeting the children, which would say something like “4C’s Shining Stars!” I decided to use the information I had received from talking with parents and instead created a personalized icon for each child on a six foot sized Smartphone poster. The icons were based on the information I got from parent outreach.
- Student reactions on the first day of school: **Priceless!** They thought: *This is a place I can use my talents and skills to be me!*

Learning Environment: Inspiring a safe, happy and inclusive classroom community



Welcoming and purposeful question to ponder



- Students respond to a target question
- Students moves their names, make a choice about which opinion resonates with them
- The question is based on student learning objectives and rotates every couple of weeks
- Students share and discuss their opinions with one another and learn to respect different points of view
- Students create new questions for future investigations

Learning Environment: Meaningful activities that engage students with opportunities for social and emotional growth.

Morning Meeting: My favorite part of the day!

- Ding! Students come quietly to a circle on the rug.
- Each child wishes one another good morning (often in different languages for fun!), always with eye contact and a smile.
- We handshake, highfive, toss a ball, or try to see how many people we can greet in 30 seconds!
- This builds connection and acknowledgement of all the kids in the room. Based on the approach from *Responsive Classroom*, emphasizing the belief that integrating academic and social-emotional skills creates an environment where students can do their best learning and create a safe and connected class community.

Typical Morning Meeting Topics

- Share a highlight of the week
- What are you the most thankful for
- Something you admire about a classmate
- Describe how you are feeling in one adjective

Assessing Student Needs

In a minute, I can get a pulse on who is tired, who is worried, who is energized... Knowing this information at the start of the day gives me a chance to check in and be proactive about potential challenges.

Learning Environment: Social interactions with peers promote cognitive growth, motivate students to take risks, and give a chance for students to express themselves independently and creatively.

Towards the end of our meeting, we also do something fun! When kids laugh and have fun together, it builds confidence, connection, teamwork and energy. Check out a video of us playing “Tricky Bear!”

Each child has a marker and they have to pass it to the person on their right while taking it from the person on their left -- all on beat and in rhythm. Harder than it looks!



Click on the image to watch the video to the left:

Learning Environment: Teamwork, practice, respect, patience

The Turn Tube!

This is something I invented in my early years of teaching, and with help from colleagues and amazing custodians, I perfected it to the result shown here. I have been using this for 13 years and without a doubt, it is one of the highlights of the classroom.

- Children feel special that they have a specific ball just for them (that they get to take home at the end of the year!)
- Each child feels valued as I set aside personal time to conference, reflect and brainstorm individually with each child about their work, without interruptions from other students.
- Minimizes wait time for teacher attention, and every child is engaged in other meaningful activities while they wait for a turn.
- Kids love moving around and putting their ball in the tube -- it's fun!

Click on image to watch video below:



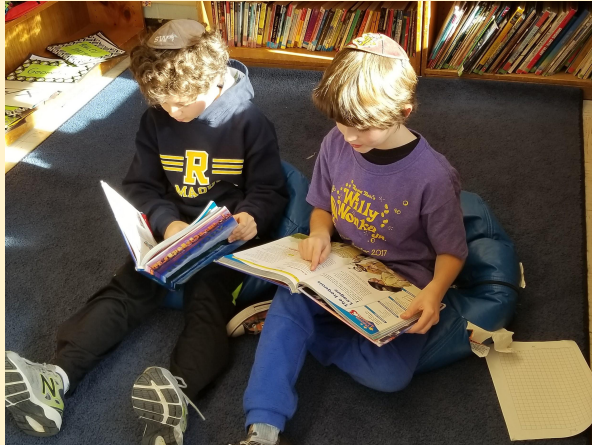
Learning Environment: Care, individual attention, taking turns, effective time management

Work Spaces



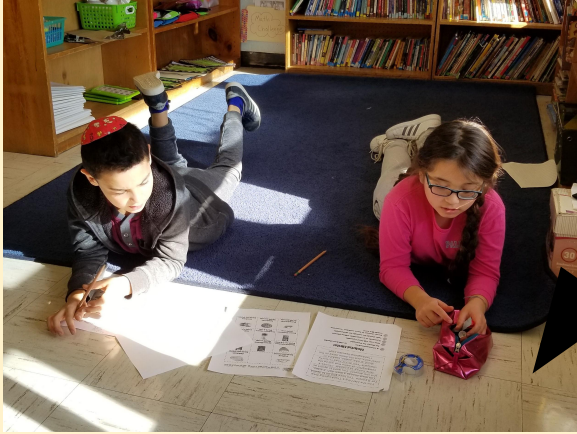
Class discussions:

- Each child should be able to have eye contact with one another.
- No staring at the back of someone's head.
- An opportunity to give another person a respectful space to express their ideas.
- It's less about the teacher, and more about what the students can create together.



Bean bag chairs:

- Fun and comfortable
- Can be moved throughout the room
- Different options for sitting



Carpet options:

- Can work on stomach to stretch
- Can spread out materials and not be confined to a desk
- Can move around legs for extra exercise and stimulation

“The Cave” (named by students):

- Cozy and enclosed corner with rugs and pillows
- More private
- Great for buddies
- (This used to be a place where teachers stored the garbage cans. Now the kids fight over whose turn it is!)



Learning Environment: Making the right choices, differentiation, working comfortably

Movement and Energizers

Click on image to watch video below:



Studies have shown that the more kids move and have opportunities for stretching, breathing and cardio-based activities, the better they are able to focus, think and create.

With that in mind, energizers are sprinkled throughout the day to do just that -- energize! When creating these activities, I also aim to integrate academics from subjects we have been learning recently. On the right is a great way to practice the mathematical concept of area!

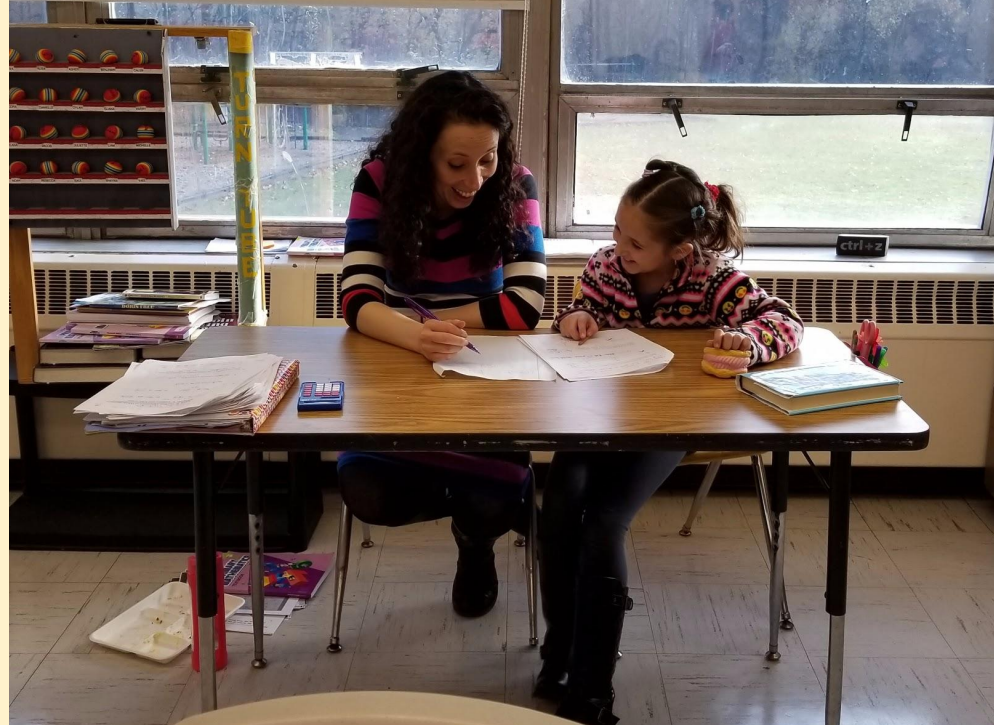


Learning Environment: Active, fun, energetic, focus

My Desk

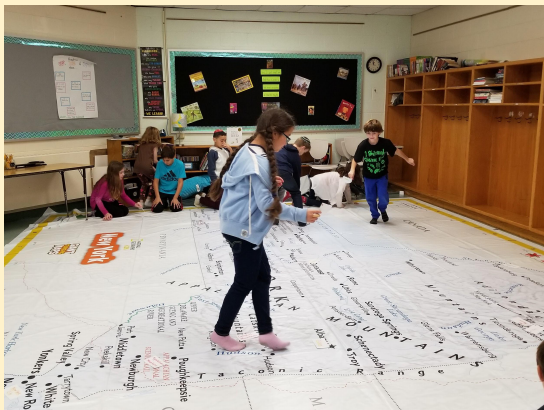


- No big, bulky desk that is centered around the teacher
- Simple, clean table solely for working with kids
- Kids can conference at same level as teacher
- Option for sitting or standing
- Creates more space in class for kids to work

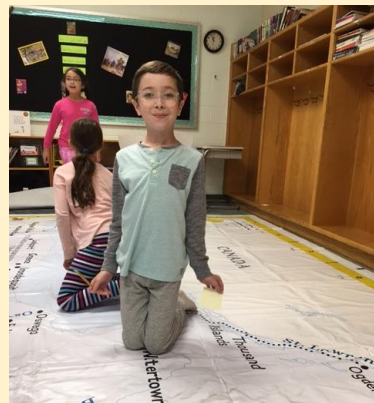
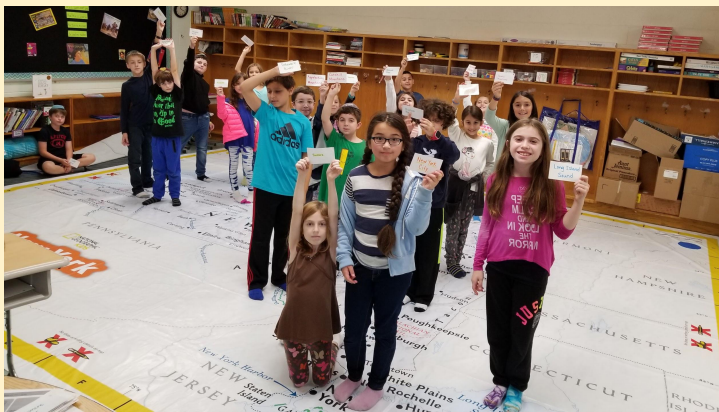
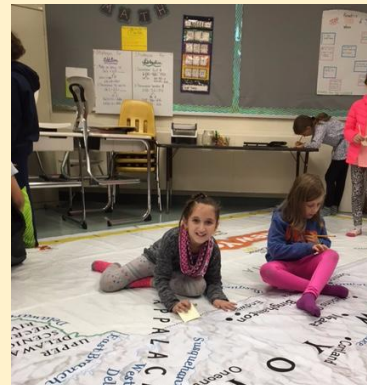


Learning Environment: It's all about the kids!

Classroom Road Trip of New York State

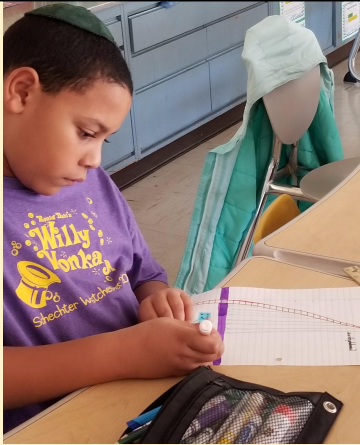


With help from the New York Geographic Alliance, I was able to borrow a walkable 16' x 20' map of New York State. The students were literally able to walk across New York's rivers, lakes, mountains and more. They found places using coordinates, walked distances from city to city, it was amazing!



Learning Environment: Active learning, exploration of interdisciplinary curriculum using mathematical spatial sense concepts and geography content skills.

Time to imagine...



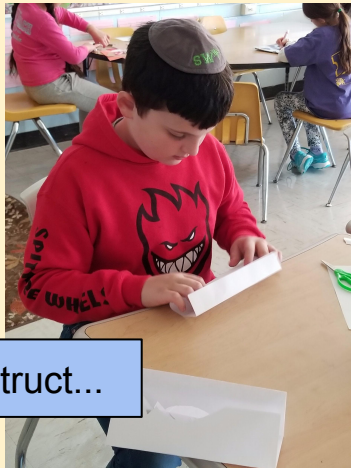
Quiet Time

- Silent 15 minutes after lunch where students may choose their own activity to do **independently**
- Peaceful music playing in background
- A chance to relax, reflect and rejuvenate oneself for the afternoon

Time to watch water fall...



Time to construct...



Learning Environment: Peace, reflection, individual space and time

Time to simply think and reflect...



Some thoughts from administration...

“When children walk into school they need to feel safe, noticed, integrated into a community, and provided with structure in order to learn and take chances. Mrs. Sroka has applied the social-emotional curriculum of Responsive Classroom at Schechter Westchester in a way that creates an atmosphere of calmed structure, emotional safety, and fun learning. She has become an RC leader in every way such as by leading programs for faculty on how to weave in the RC curriculum throughout the school day. Mrs. Sroka shows an astounding investment into creating an atmosphere of social awareness through meetings, songs, movement, sharing, and dialogue. All within a 5-10 minute fun and engaging activity, she has her students targeting social skills, movement, community, memory, and learning. It has been remarkable to watch children with behavioral health needs flourish in this environment and it is fully attributed to the sound implementation of a tremendous program by Mrs. Sroka.”

-- Dr. Jordana Klein, School Psychologist

...and parents

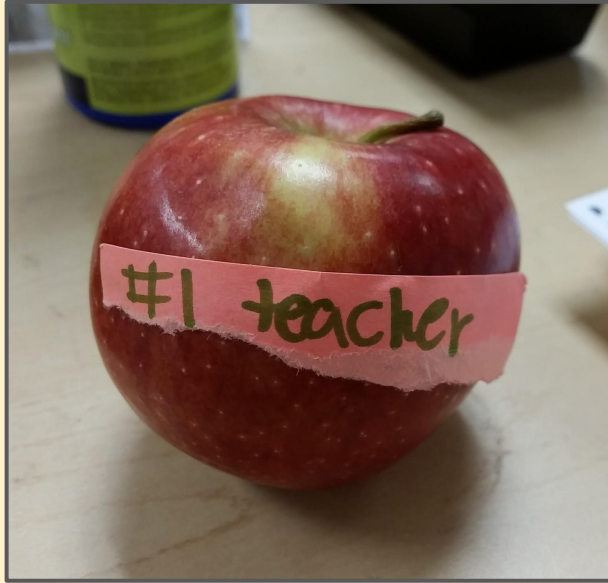
Emma is super sensitive and does not respond well to any yelling in the classroom or an overly strict classroom environment. She is extremely creative and learns best when she can learn and be creative at the same time. This years class placement for Emma was perfection!! Ms. Kohen keeps Emma engaged and excited about learning. Ms. Kohen is an extremely warm, nurturing, and positive Teacher. She challenges Emma academically but in such a positive, uplifting, and warm way. She has been so happy and felt very safe this year.

Dear Ms. Kohen

Thank you for a fabulous year! Leah absolutely LOVED having you as her teacher. You were the perfect match for her and she truly enjoyed being in your classroom. You made learning fun + engaging, and the classroom such a warm, caring community. We were so impressed with not only your creativity and multidimensional teaching, but also by how much you value, care for, and know your students. We appreciate →

Thank you for an outstanding year. Aidan has grown so much + loved being in your class. Your dedication + creativity, your patience + warmth made such a difference in his life. We felt so blessed to have a teacher who really "got him". Have a great summer.
The Family

And some student appreciation

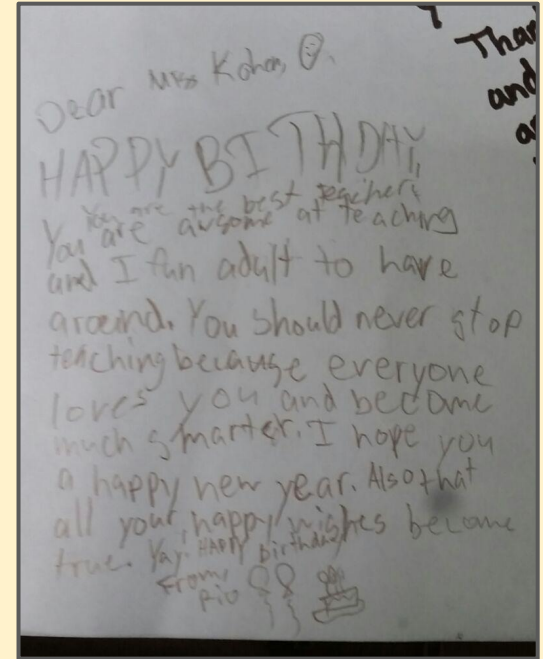


(Maybe next time I'll get a whole post-it note. 😊)



A personalized, handmade pipe cleaner sculpture of yours truly.

In all seriousness...



Today
Rabbi

תודה רבה

References

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<http://nygeographicalliance.org>