

**Urban Community School 'attuned' to different learning styles**

By Wendy A. Hoke

Celebrating learning differences fits well with the philosophy at Urban Community School (UCS), an independent Catholic School on Cleveland's West Side. This past week the entire faculty has been in an intensive instruction designed to help them teach children better.

Susan Barnhart, a first and second grade teacher at UCS, took part in Schools Attuned last year and had the opportunity to put the ideas into practice during the school year.

"I'm taking master's classes right now and brain research comes up in every class. We're always talking about how students learn and putting that into the educational strategy," she said.

Schools Attuned teaches educators about different learning styles, and how those can be tapped in the classroom.

The training, which will be implemented by all teachers this school year, is based on neurodevelopmental research done at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine and our understanding of the constructs that affect learning such as language, spatial ordering, memory and higher order cognition.

"It has always been our philosophy at UCS that students learn in different ways, and to reflect that, our teaching focuses on individualized instruction rather than standardized lessons," said Sister Maureen Doyle, school director. "The Schools Attuned program expands on that view."

The training is intense and Barnhart admits she was a bit overwhelmed at first. But the ideas fell into place through the classroom training.

"When we become aware of different learning styles, the children become aware of that also," explained Principal Pam Delly, who also participated in the training last year. "Students realize that it's okay for them to do things differently and as a result you have a classroom free of humiliation."

The idea behind this educational approach is to meet children where they are. Some are good at taking tests, some at making presentations, some need to tell teachers what they learned, and others prefer to use artistic representation.

"It becomes the norm that children are being assessed in different ways," added Delly.

Barnhart said the result is that teachers feel a sense of freedom and flexibility in how they approach classroom instruction.

That's why UCS is offering the training to its entire faculty. "It's helpful if our staff all have the same vocabulary and understanding of what's happening with our students," said Delly. "It helps that teachers continue to build on student strengths versus student weaknesses."

Another important component to the training is the staff-initiated collaboration that has developed. Teachers became interested in reading and discussing workshop creator Dr. Mel Levine's book, "A Mind at a Time," and held discussion groups to help familiarize everyone with the concepts.

"We met after hours and had a cross-section of different levels of teachers. It was great because we could take as much time as we needed as opposed to the classroom training time, which moves along quickly," said Barnhart.

So what does Schools Attuned look like in the classroom?

Delly said that one younger child was proficient in reading, but didn't enjoy the early reader series. The child was interested in architecture and started reading when presented with books about Cleveland architecture.

"Hopefully we will continue building on children's interests, acknowledging that everyone learns differently and to appreciate and celebrate those differences," said Delly.