

Discovering new stories

This year's CFE theme puts focus on listening to others

BY ANN OAKMAN
Staff Writer

Pitter-patters and stomps from shoes echo throughout the gym as the little kids zoom around. Their laughs are roaring and their smiles are beaming as Anna Noble and her peers chase them around the gym at Baby's Space in Minneapolis.

Baby's Space is one of many local site options students can choose from to fulfil their Cultural Field Experience requirement for the year.

"I liked Baby's Space so much because I got to make kids laugh and have fun [with kids] who may not have the best home life," said Noble, then a sophomore. "I really just wanted to make their day fun so they didn't have to think about [their home life]. I chose to go back for that reason and it was just overall enjoyable."

Cultural Field Experience (CFE) takes place in March of every year. For one week, ninth, tenth and eleventh graders travel to local, national and international sites to learn from and experience cultures unique from their own.

This year about 80 students will be traveling nationally or internationally, while about 186 students visit local sites, all led by their teachers.

"CFE is an opportunity for students, and really all people who participate, to step outside of themselves and their daily routine to see a greater picture of what the world is," said Jessa Anderson, director of cultural immersion. "[Students can discover] who [the world is] made up of and the different stories that make this world what it is. [CFE offers] an opportunity for us to learn from other people, grow from other people and develop ourselves as global citizens."

Although it is her second year working full time as the director, this is the first year that she has developed a theme for CFE. This year's theme is "Discover a New Story."

"I mean, we're all made up of our own stories, right?" said Anderson. "Every single person has a story that's unique to them and it's developed who they are. We are who we are because of the things that are part of our lives and our stories. I don't know your story, you don't know my story. But as we learn each other's story, all of a sudden, you find connections and you find things that are similar, and you find ways to empathize with each other because you know each other."

One of Anderson's deep hopes for students is for them to develop empathy during their CFE.

"A big part of CFE is developing empathy," said Anderson. "You can't develop empathy if you don't practice it. You can't empathize with people if you don't know who they are and what their stories are. Empathy is a learned thing, right? It's not something that we just do automatically. [CFE is] an opportunity to learn how we empathize with

"I didn't know a lot about MS before this CFE week, so I think I was a little fearful or maybe nervous about the experience. I didn't know what to expect, but I forced myself to go in open-minded. I'm so thankful I did. Once I started to know the members and get a better understanding, it was really fun and rewarding."

— junior at MC

Achievement Center

others and to practice that as well."

Students can develop empathy at any site they choose. Whether it's in Minnesota, a national trip or international trip, students are exposed to eye-opening experiences.

Overnight trips, which consist of international and national locations, seem to hold the most excitement for students. With destinations such as Honduras, Slovakia or Vietnam, students know they are in for an incredible experience. They partake in service work, visit famous sites and absorb the culture. This year, students are traveling to the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, Chicago, Haiti, Guatemala, London, Spain and a summer trip to Slovakia.

Unlike overnight sites, local



Photo by Collin Quinn

Kevvan Anderson and Tony Avila-Tovalin, sophomores in March 2019, play with children at Westside Summit, a St. Paul charter school that closed in June.

sites are split up into categories. Elementary and early education, elderly care, social and community service and experiential. Although they aren't as exhilarating as overnight destinations, they do leave a lasting impression on students and teachers.

"There have been a couple [local] organizations that I've worked with on CFE where I was really impressed by what they did," said

Nathan Johnson, social studies teacher, who has been inspired by CFE local sites to continue volunteering outside of school. "And then I felt like I really want to keep supporting these people after CFE and there are a couple of them that I've done that with."

This was similar to sophomore Olivia Majors, who was warmed by the residents of the Minnesota Veterans Home during her ninth grade CFE trip. She continues to volunteer and visit some of the friends she made — Dennis, Tommy and Vincent.

"I will never forget the smile on Tommy's face the first time I went back and visited him, he somehow remembered my name," said Majors. "Seeing him happy made me happy."

Local sites give students the opportunity to recognize what is happening right next door and provides an accessible option.

"I would say that I love our local CFE so deeply because it does offer a tangible way to say 'hey, you can do this all the time. This is not something you just do in March,'" said Anderson.

To some students, traveling to Europe and a week without homework may seem like a vacation, but CFE is more than that. CFE teaches lessons that aren't easily taught in a classroom. Both students and teachers learn about others and themselves as they open their eyes and ears to stories different from their own.

"If you are really trying to learn something and find an interesting experience, it can be one of the most memorable things that happens to you at school and something that you'll look back on, years later, and identify as maybe the most important learning experience you had..." said Johnson. "I would say it's up to you in terms of how important it is."



Photo by Abby Hobrough

Linnea Askegaard, sophomore in March 2019, pushes a child on a swing at Baby's Space, a Minneapolis childcare center.