



## More than 1,000 Pioneer Valley third graders learning about film through program at Amherst Cinema

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**Diane Lederman, The Republican**

By

**AMHERST** - On a recent Thursday morning the classroom for about 50 Holyoke third graders moved from the Edward N. White Elementary School to the cushioned theater seats of the **Amherst Cinema**.

Some of these students have never left Holyoke nor been to a theater quite like this non-profit, but they are having the kind of time where it was hard for them to contain their excitement as Jake Meginsky the new Director of Education at Amherst Cinema told them about an 11-year-old Chicago boy's one-minute film that they would soon see.



Photo by Diane Lederman/The Republican

Jake Meginsky the new Director of Education at Amherst Cinema tells students from the EN White Elementary School in Holyoke about the films they will be seeing that morning.

"It all starts with a great story. They're all inside you," he said and explained that the boy "was inspired to make (a movie) from his favorite book." **The story was Octavio Paz' "My Life with a Wave."**

Fifty classes from six school districts throughout the Pioneer Valley are taking part in the **See-Hear-Feel-Film** project created a decade ago by Anne Marie Santoro, the former Director of Education Programs and Services at the Children's Television Workshop.

The **Amherst Cinema** is the third cinema nationwide offering the program aimed at teaching students how to watch movies and tell stories through film, said Carol M. Johnson, cinema executive director.

Before watching, Meginsky asked the students what books and movies have in common and virtually every student had his or hand raised to answer.

Teachers Deborah Poulin and Susan DesJardins said they were surprised how enthusiastic their students were and were learning things about them they didn't know. They didn't know, for example, that one student knew about end credits on a movie.

Both she and math teacher Poulin see a myriad benefits in the program that will continue into the spring when the class returns for live action films. Both on this day were animated stories.

"We've been doing personal narrative," DesJardins said. "It will help them with creative writing. This will help bring that to life for them."

After seeing the two films the students created poems inspired from the movies.

Back in Holyoke, they will be developing storyboards in class in anticipation of their return for the spring.

The program has other benefits, the teachers said. It offers them the chance to leave Holyoke.

"They don't get to see a college town like Amherst," DesJardins said. "This is a very different theater," she said, referring to the cinemas they might visit.

"It fits in with our mission of being an educational and cultural (venue,)" Johnson said of the reasons for their participation. "We knew we had the space." The theater is not used in the mornings. "It's such an inspirational program."

The cinema through fund-raising and grants is covering the cost for districts like Holyoke that have at least a third of their population receiving free lunch, said Gail Lansky, the theater outreach and development director. The program costs \$99 per student or about \$110,000 in total.



With all costs covered, the class will still get one field trip, said English Language Arts teacher DesJardins.

Plus working with the volunteers who help lead the group activities after the film lets them "have other grownups besides their teachers who are interested in them."

Volunteers are college students or retired participants in the RSVP senior volunteer, program said Johnson.

"It's an amazing opportunity for our

Photo by Diane Lederman / The Republican

Luis Medina, 8, left, and Jezriel Torres, 8, get a popcorn break during a recent program at the Amherst Cinema. Both are students at the EN White School in Holyoke

district," said Isolda Ortega-Bustamante, director of state and federal programs for the Holyoke Public Schools.

And she said it fits well with their curriculum. The district is working to ensure students are reading to grade level by the time they are in third grade and this helps.

Here "They are listening and talking and writing poems and a story as a group. There are so many levels of learning."

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