

## URBAN BLIGHT, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Rivera, McCall Elementary School

Not three days after finalizing their topic as "urban blight," several students in Michelle Rivera's 6th grade class — including every one of her ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) students — brought in photographs, internet pictures, definitions, and information related to their topic.

"When I sent them all home with cameras," Michelle recalls, "they were eager to do their part to capture images of what they consider to be urban blight in their neighborhoods."

Seven of the 29 students in the class are recent immigrants. Michelle was pleased to discover that the discussions were fostering communication between native and new English speakers. The process allowed the quiet students to know their opinions mattered and that their voices would be heard along with those of others in the class.

Two community partners helped shed light on the problem of urban blight. Mural artist David McShane showed photos of the many murals he has painted for Philadelphia's Mural Arts program. He displayed before-and-after pictures of graffitied walls transformed into works of art. The students were transfixed.

He challenged the students to come up with their own idea to address the problem of urban blight.

"Think of ways you can make where you are beautiful," he said, "whether it's your room at home, your classroom, your playground. Be the change you want to see!"

A representative from the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia intrigued the students with her encouragement that they demonstrate through their project that "this place matters."

Inspired by these messages, the students worked with their teacher to plan a silent procession from the school's Society Hill neighborhood to Chinatown and back, picking up trash, litter and recyclables along the way.

"We didn't have to say a word to communicate our intention," recalls Michelle. "We could see that we were affecting people by their faces, their comments to

the students. "

The class attacked their problem on a variety of fronts: they wrote poetry and creative stories, designed comic strips and the logo for a t-shirt; they even wrote a song, which they sang on tier neighborhood clean-up day in May.

"Keep it clean, a beautiful sight.  
We challenge you to erase the blight!"

"It's made me more comfortable to give up control in the class," says Michelle, "knowing that students are capable of working together to accomplish a goal they set for themselves."