



SAN GABRIEL UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

PRESS RELEASE

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San Gabriel Unified Teacher Inspires Student Achievement through Project-Based Learning

SAN GABRIEL, CA – For the last 13 years, Jefferson Middle School eighth-grade language arts teacher Heather Wolpert-Gawron has followed a simple approach to teaching: to make schoolwork fun with long-term projects that sharpen her students' critical thinking skills.

"If you can make a middle schooler smile during the day – that's almost as important as any other academic goal because you have to engage these students and give them reasons to be happy," Wolpert-Gawron said. "If you can reach them, then they're yours and they'll hear what you have to say and be willing to try new things."

Wolpert-Gawron is known for her use of project-based learning, a form of instruction that develops attitudes and lateral thinking in her students by teaching them how to thoughtfully respond to engaging and complex challenges with hands-on work. She said project-based learning encourages students to think of their own solutions with limited guidance.

Under Wolpert-Gawron's guidance, Jefferson students have embraced project-based learning through activities like the superhero unit, in which eighth-graders create scientifically-realistic heroes and form leagues to pitch global solutions to the United Nations.

Her most celebrated schoolwide activity is the Invention Convention, which gives students two months to design, fabricate and market inventions to solve everyday problems. During last year's event, more than 600 students had their work judged by JPL and Cal Tech representatives.

"I love to see teachers develop project-based learning mentalities because it embraces student choice along with independent and collaborative learning," Wolpert-Gawron said. "Those activities help students look back on middle school in a positive way."

Wolpert-Gawron discovered her interest in teaching when she was working in publicity as an executive assistant.

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After creating a lesson plan for a Hollywood entertainment producer's child, she realized her love of education outweighed her enjoyment of working in the entertainment industry.

Wolpert-Gawron continued to work in publicity while taking night and online classes, obtaining her teaching credential from Cal State Northridge in 2000. She also received a master's in instructional design and technology with an online learning emphasis from Walden University in 2010.

After working for several schools in Northern California for four years, Wolpert-Gawron joined San Gabriel Unified in 2004 and started teaching at Jefferson Middle School.

"Heather is innovative, she's willing to take chances and she's willing to try new ideas in order to keep education interesting for her students," Jefferson Middle School Principal Matt Arnold said. "Our students see her as someone who sincerely cares about their development and they enjoy the way she challenges them."

Wolpert-Gawron also stays current with the latest in teaching techniques through her Twitter account and writes blog posts for an education website called Edutopia. Most recently, she was granted National Faculty status by the Buck Institute of Education, one of the country's leading project-based learning research and training organizations. Her fifth educational book is due out in fall and focuses on student engagement while also emphasizing project-based learning.

"We're very proud to have Heather Wolpert-Gawron in our San Gabriel Unified family, as she is a major source for inspiration for our teachers and staff," SGUSD Superintendent Dr. John Pappalardo said. "Her work ethic and ideas have provided her students with unparalleled academic and behavioral development."

PHOTO CAPTION:

091817_SANGAB_HEATHER: Eighth-grade language arts teacher Heather Wolpert-Gawron (left) aims to engage and excite her students with her interesting lesson plans using project-based learning.

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