



Bellflower Unified School District

Media Release

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Bellflower Unified Home Studies Students Pursue 'Genius Hour' Explorations

BELLFLOWER – Alana Flores, 11, loves “Legend of Zelda,” but wanted to find out how the popular video game would need to be restructured if the hero and villain were to swap places.

Gioanni Hurst, 13, wanted to write a movie script, Anneke Buurma, 12, wanted to write an encouraging song and Gabriel Dao, 13, wanted to build a beam that would automatically balance a ball.

So they did it – all of them.

The students, who attend a Friday enrichment program at the Home Education Independent Study Academy at Bellflower Unified's Las Flores Educational Center to supplement their homeschooling, engaged in projects of their own devising for about 90 minutes every Friday this fall.

The "Genius Hour" program is modeled on Google's highly successful employee motivational tool. At Google, associates set their own projects for 20 percent of their time, a chance to let their creativity leap past workplace boundaries. The effort has led to such innovations as Gmail.

Now, teachers like Bellflower Unified's Leah Moak are using the same idea to provide students with lessons in research, critical thinking and resourcefulness. Students created a driving question and then conducted research that led to a product. At the end of the semester, they gave presentations on their products.

“They love doing it,” said Moak, an 11-year BUSD teacher who started at Las Flores last year. “The biggest hurdle we’ve found is getting them to be realistic with their products, but we didn’t want to shoot down any ideas.”

In fact, Moak said those heightened expectations led to an unsuspected benefit.

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"We learned it's not really about the product. It's about the mindset," she said. "When you face a hurdle, what are you going to do? What direction are you going to take?"

For example, Flores realized during her project that she couldn't rebuild Zelda to match her vision in a semester. But she could create a blog and engage the Zelda online community with her ideas.

"The goal of the blog is to educate people. It's about perspective. I like studying perspective and I wanted to give people a new perspective on the game's villain, because he's very misunderstood," Flores said. "I've reached out to a lot of Zelda fans."

Flores said she sees her goal as a long-term project to pursue over the next few years.

"I've learned that people's minds are powerful," she added. "Whatever they're passionate about, they can do. So reaching out to them is really the most important thing."

Buurma said she wrote her song as a way of helping people deal with challenges.

"I wanted to be able to encourage people using my gift. When I listen to certain songs, it encourages me to deal with different challenges, like homework overload or my brother annoying me, and just being able to get through it with a better attitude," Buurma said.

She said the project taught her perseverance.

"I've never written a song beginning to end before," she said.

Dao said he chose the balance beam project because he wants to go into robotics. The effort was frustrating when his coding didn't perform consistently. He was dogged about making adjustments to get the results he needed.

"The greatest moment was when it actually balanced the ball where I wanted it to," he said.

Hurst initially wanted to write and shoot a movie, but decided to tackle her project in steps.

"I didn't have enough time to do all of it now," she said.

She completed her script – acting out a section with classmates during her presentation – and now plans to take on the challenges of directing and acting during the next semester. The movie is a thriller.

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"I enjoy scary movies and I asked a couple of my classmates and they said they enjoy the same thing. So not just me but other people my age enjoy things that are thrillers or horror movies. But I didn't want to make it too scary because then not everybody would watch it," she said.

Eighth-grader German Garcia, who created a website to help new players learn Pokémon Go, said he liked the freedom students had to choose their own projects.

"We could be creative. We could do anything we wanted," he said.

"We could integrate our passions," Buurma added.

Moak said she will tinker with the program during the next semester, using lessons gained this time to help students focus on their goals and keep up with the demands of the research.

But already, district officials are applauding the success of a tool that has teachers focusing on guiding enthusiastic student researchers as they explore new frontiers.

"This kind of innovative approach is at the heart of our Las Flores program," Superintendent Dr. Brian Jacobs said. "It starts with idea of enrichment Fridays, where students have the opportunity to explore elective-style interests to supplement their home studies. Now, with Genius Hour, there's an entirely new vista of opportunities opening up."

PHOTOS

122016_BUSD_GENIUS_1: Bellflower Unified Home Study Independent Academy student Anneke Buurma, 12, performs a song on Dec. 9 she wrote as part of a special enrichment project.

122016_BUSD_GENIUS_2: Bellflower Unified Home Study Independent Academy student Alana Flores, 11, on Dec. 9 shows a blog she created that explores the impacts of reversing the roles of hero and villain in the popular video game, "Legend of Zelda." Flores created the blog as part of a special enrichment project.

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