Elementary Investors: A Project-based Learning Approach

By Sandria Morten

Jaime's task was to find the perfect car for the Smith family, and he is convinced that he has succeeded. He enthusiastically presents his research on the Ford Focus. His PowerPoint slides demonstrate the car's size and comfort, and present statistics on safety and crash test ratings, factors which are important to these parents of young children. He highlights the impressive highway mileage since Mr. Smith commutes 60 miles per day, and compares the cost of gas for a year with the Focus to its competitors. The low emissions appeal to the environmentally conscious Mrs. Smith, and as Jaime explains the financing options, it becomes obvious that this car fits into the family's budget. Jaime becomes most animated at the end of the presentation, as he describes the options for leather seating and an installed MP3 player.

Jaime did not make the sale, but he did make an A. This knowledgeable car salesman is actually a seventh grade student at St. Matthias Transfiguration School, in the Lincoln Square neighborhood of Chicago. The Smith's car dilemma was a hypothetical situation dreamed up by his teacher as a project which would incorporate math, science, and language arts. The seventh grade class worked in groups to research in class, and then visited Z Frank Chevrolet Dealership to learn from the experts about considerations when buying a car. In addition, Ravenswood Bank visited the class, explaining loans and interest rates. Through the entirety of this month long project, the junior high students were enthused, and even talked about what they were learning at school at home with their parents.

The car project is an example of the authentic learning which is replacing the textbooks and worksheets of the last decade. Sixth through eighth grade students at St. Matthias Transfiguration School participate in Project Based Learning (PBL). This student-centered method allows our students to further develop critical thinking skills and maintain ownership over their learning. The students realize that learning is not found in a textbook or a teacher-focused lesson, but rather through their own exploration. They are motivated by their own questions, collect and analyze data, draw conclusions, apply learning to their life, and then ask more questions. The comprehensive approach to teaching allows students to become self-directed, life-long learners.

Access to technology facilitates this type of learning. All junior high students at SMTS are given their own laptops, which they carry to each class with them. Students become proficient in programs such as Excel and PowerPoint, and learn to research responsibly using the internet. The students' safety is insured through protective spyware designed specifically for schools. Jaime presented his PowerPoint on a Promethean ActivBoard. These interactive white boards are installed in several classrooms and even allow students to answer multiple choice questions from their desks using remotes.

Gone are the days of getting it or getting left behind. Technology, such as the ActivBoards, allow teachers automatic feedback on students' understanding. The project-based method helps teachers to tailor the instruction to a student's learning needs providing additional support or enhancing the project as a challenge. "At St. Matthias Transfiguration, we realize that each child has unique learning needs and we are dedicated to meeting students at their level," said Sandria DeSapio, principal.

You might do a double take as you overhear Jacob, a fifth grader, talking about his reasons for short selling stock over the lunch table. It will be especially surprising when his teachers tell you that it is the first year in which Jacob has not received an unfavorable conduct report. Project-based learning, such as the fifth grade's stock market game, increases motivation and brings out the best in our students. Students today will be working in a 21st Century world and need to develop the skills which will help them succeed. Critical thinking, technological skills, and integration of knowledge are essential components to success in the workplace. By supporting these new instructional approaches we are investing in our future.

- *Sandria Morten is the principal of St. Matthias Transfiguration School, 4910 N. Claremont Ave. Chicago*

Addendum:

Since this was written, the junior high has done additional PBL projects including building a model of the Lincoln Square of the future, creating a time capsule, raising money for Swedish Covenant hospital through a bake sale and teaching senior citizens how to use the internet.