

Bright Students, Big City

If some local third-graders had their way, their classrooms would have a pool, a roller coaster and, oh yeah, a mud bath, in addition to the normal desks, bookshelves, computers and bulletin boards. But don't worry—everything would have the proper zoning. These unorthodox additions are just a few of the ideas kids come up with during the city planning lesson of an innovative, Helen Putnam Award-winning program in Carlsbad schools called CityStuff.

CityStuff is the brainchild of retired Assistant City Manager Frank Mannen, and was started in 2002 in 12 third-grade classrooms at Jefferson and Pacific Rim elementary schools. The program brings students and teachers together with volunteers from the community for six lessons that explore how a city works, including segments on city planning, the role of businesses and newspapers, local history and city government. It concludes with a mock city council meeting where students play roles and debate an issue that the real city council actually voted on. It now brings more than 60 volunteers to more than 1,400 students in 60 classrooms every year.

Bobbi Seelig, a third-grade teacher at Magnolia Elementary and 20-year veteran of Carlsbad schools, is a big fan of the CityStuff program. The curriculum—developed in conjunction with Junior Achievement, a nonprofit organization that brings real-world lessons to classrooms worldwide—is “just unbelievable,” she says. “It’s so well put together. The activities are very hands on and extremely fun, and [students] learn so much about city operations, planning and different areas of the city. It gives a real add-on and a personal touch.”

CityStuff coordinator Kathy Siemion emphasizes that all the lessons are tied in to the third-grade social studies curriculum and geared to the students’ level. Kids get activity booklets on city history and stories about key community members, write their own newspaper article, design a city and place buildings according to the proper zones (and design their ideal “zoned” classroom), plan their own restaurant and go on a field trip to City Hall for the mock council meeting.

But it’s not clear who gets the most out of CityStuff—the students, teachers or volunteers. The program draws volunteers from all parts of the community, with backgrounds as diverse as banking, real estate, city staff, the Fire Marshal’s office and even the FBI. Dan Ryan is a retired FBI agent who has volunteered with the program “since day one,” he says, and loves it. “Interacting with the kids and seeing how smart they are with the problems and the enthusiasm they show” is what keeps him coming back.

As far as what the students get out of CityStuff, there are certainly kids who come out of it saying, “I want to be mayor when I grow up,” says Seelig. But more than that, she sees that the program helps students “learn that they can dream for themselves, be responsible for themselves but responsible for their city as well. And they also see that they can go to the city and that they have a voice.”

(From top to bottom) Volunteer Carrie Farrell explains the importance of newspaper headlines to students at Magnolia Elementary; students in Betsy Lamb’s third-grade class take part in a mock city council meeting in Council Chambers; Jefferson Elementary students get a visit from members of the Carlsbad Fire Department as part of the curriculum.



Photo: Fred Gates

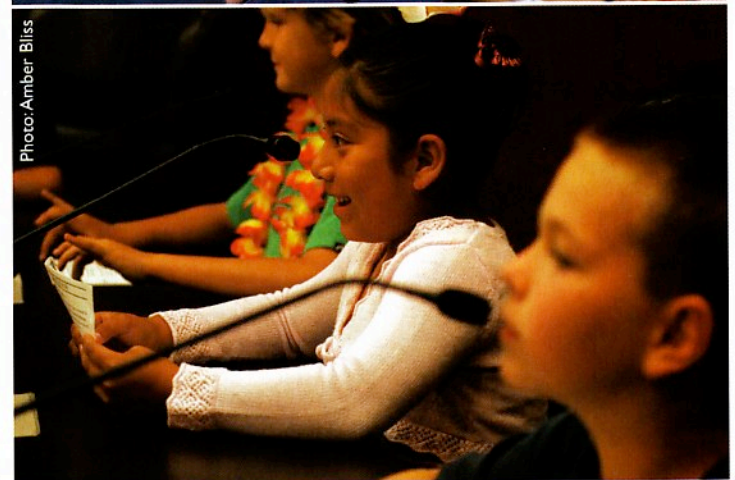


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