

Publication: Greenwich Time; Date: Dec 13, 2014; Section: News; Page: A1

SCHOOLWIDE INITIATIVE AT RIVERSIDE

GENIUS HOUR

Students get to work on independent study projects during some Friday classes

By Paul Schott

Every school day is inevitably full of assignments that Greenwich students have to do — like their counterparts everywhere. But what if they want to choose what they do? Perhaps write a graphic novel, or make paper-plane tutorials, or learn about super-viruses or raise awareness about the plight of sea turtles?

At Riverside School, students do not have to wait until the school bell rings to pursue personal projects. They can do them right in the classroom, as part of a new initiative called Genius Hour.

“If it weren’t for Genius Hour, we wouldn’t be able to study what we want to study or do what we want to do for a project,” said fifth-grader Kevin Keaveney. He is part of a team writing a graphic novel about “Rupert Jr.,” an eraser that comes to life.

Launched in October, the initiative fits into one of the elementary school’s central themes, innovation. During the twice-monthly Genius Hours, students in every grade can explore their interests and experiment creatively. In contrast to traditional instruction, which is usually teacher driven, the Genius Hours are led by students. They choose their projects. Teachers still play a critical role, but they act more like advisers than instructors. “It helps them to develop independent work skills and develop helping skills because they help each other,” said Riverside Principal Christopher Weiss. “They work collaboratively on a very high level. And they have to be independent thinkers because it’s their project that they came up with. Their job is to research and have a driving question that they want to answer through their project.”

Technology figures heavily into the Genius Hours. All Riverside students have iPads, as part of the district’s Digital Learning Environment initiative. With the tablets, they do online research, watch and make videos and create presentations for their Genius Hour projects.

“Last year, we only had a few computers and if we all had to do something, we had to go to the lab,” said fifth-grader Bryce Metalios, who is working with classmate Luke Scanlan on an origami project. “It’s much better this way with the iPads.”

So far, teachers report that students are getting the hang of the Genius Hour concept. A lot of trial and error happened in the first few sessions, but momentum is now building.

“They came up with these ideas, and then they started to work on them and ran into some obstacles or found it really wasn’t what they wanted to do,” said fifth-grade teacher Mary Anstey. “Many of them have changed what they wanted to work on.

“All of a sudden, they’re very passionate about what they’re learning. They have found things they’re interested in, and they’ve picked up on other students’ ideas. It’s very exciting.”

Students will do at least one Genius Hour project this year — and perhaps more. And students seem to be confident about striking out on their own.

“You can go out and discover what you want to learn,” said fifth-grader Dominique Isaacs, who is studying super-viruses. “It’s been a really good experience to figure out all of this. It feels really good to try out new ideas.”
pschott@scni.com; 203-625-4439; twitter: @paulschott



Above, visiting Greenwich High School social studies teacher Mike Belanger, left, observes Riverside School third grade students, Jake D'Angelo, 8, center, and Emmett Graham, 9, work on their project about what makes the cheetah the fastest land animal during Genius Hour.



Above, Riverside School second grade student Jenna Pobjoy, 7, works on an iPad during Genius Hour, a new schoolwide initiative.



At left, Charlie

Fiore, 8, uses an iPad to connect to and manipulate an interactive National Geographic game about African wildlife during Genius Hour on Friday.

Bob Luckey/Staff photographer



Bob Luckey/Staff photographer

At right, Naomi Park, 8, a third-grade student, works with her Riverside School teacher Jayne Hirshfield on Friday during Genius Hour, a new schoolwide initiative that allows students to work on independent study projects that they choose two Fridays each month.



Riverside School third-grade student Esme Daplyn, 8, works on her project about trees during Genius Hour on Friday.