H.B.’s Valley gives students power over their learning

Posted: Saturday, January 11, 2014 9:00 am

by Eric Michael Stitt | 0 comments

With the goal of improving a child’s ability to learn about several subjects and focus on more appealing classes, Hermosa Valley School has revamped its electives program, giving its students more choice and more power over their own education.

Prior to this school year, students took a set schedule of classes, with electives chosen for them, regardless of their interest. But now the reconfigured system allows students to select which elective they’d like to take and the options have expanded. Valley Principal Kim Taylor said it’s a change that brings excitement to the curriculum and engages students by giving them control of what they want to learn.

The electives offered to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at Valley include several classes regarding technology and art in addition to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) and Masterminds, which are only for sixth-graders.

The classes for sixth and seventh grade are offered in two packages, while the eighth-graders can choose from four. Taylor said the students select their preference, but are not always guaranteed that class.

Sixth-graders, for example, can select Package A, which focuses on art and online community journalism or Package B which involves technology and includes STEAM. All students in sixth grade take the Masterminds class, which gives them information about how their brains work and teaches them to be mindful, according to MasterMinds teacher Erin Infusino.

Seventh-graders are able to select Package A, which includes art, technology and drama or Package B’s art and technology.

Valley’s eighth-graders have the option to take art split into two semesters on perfecting skills and an introduction to animation, videos and photography with Package A or Package B’s year-long art class allowing students to apply their skills to more challenging projects. Eighth graders can also take the tech class STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) to explore digital video gaming and manufacturing for Package C or Package D’s Spanish class.

“It’s an opportunity for children to experience different parts of education,” Taylor said. “It gives students in this age range the opportunity to feel they have a choice … the response has been positive.”

She said it was important for students to build on what they enjoy learning as opposed to taking one class and having to move on from it for another one they might not be as interested in.

For example, Taylor said in the old system, “students only get art once, then never again.” But the revamped electives program lets them expand on what they enjoy most.

Masterminds is a new class brought in during the reshuffling of the program. Infusino said the class “blends mindful awareness teachings and executive functioning lessons.” The class is described as helping students become life-long learners while addressing the skills needed for the future.

She also said at this age in their young lives, it’s vital for the students to begin the self-selected electives courses with Masterminds because it helps build a solid foundation for learning. Infusino said mindfulness is an awareness of the present moment and it teaches students to better self-regulate their behaviors.
“I feel like I’m teaching these kids such a valuable lesson on how to manage stress and live a life of gratitude and awareness,” Infusino said.

STEAM, another new electives class, was created by teacher Monique Gonzalez to help expand on the program and build off what is offered.

“This class is an exciting way to bring together multiple disciplines through interactive lessons and real-world, applied learning,” Gonzalez said.

Students learn higher-level problem-solving skills with hands-on projects based in foundations of science, technology, engineering, art and math.

“This class opens their eyes to many different types of careers that they may be interested in the future,” said Gonzalez, who works closely with the other teachers to make sure her lessons complement theirs.

The technology classes are offered to students in grades six, seven and eight and cover a variety of categories relating to the subject.

Sandi Tsosie teaches an introductory class about cutting-edge technology through engineering, flight and graphic design for sixth-graders. Seventh graders can take her class that explores technologies with digital arts and manufacturing or a more advanced course that involves digital arts, design and woodworking.

Her eighth-graders explore higher-level technologies and 3D designing and printing and laser design.

Tsosie said the technology classes allow the young students to explore and discover what is happening in the world around them and then apply it to the course.

“Students are given an opportunity to explore with the subject, and walk away knowing that technology does not only mean computers,” Tsosie said. “They learn that there is a lot of math and science involved in the subject. They are able to take what they learn and apply it to other classes. They also get a great opportunity to learn manufacturing by using various machines. Students also get to look into the world of engineering and manufacturing and see if it’s a path they would like to continue in high school and college.”

Robyn Alatorre teaches the art classes for sixth through eighth grades and said the subject is vital to helping children become well-rounded students.

“(Art helps them) understand how other areas of study connect to visual arts,” Alatorre said. “For example, they use geometry when learning linear perspective, science with color theory, history and social studies when they learn about art from another period or from another culture, and use language skills with art appreciation units.”

Sixth-graders can take a class called exploring visual art. Then in seventh grade, there are two options — Package A’s intermediate drawing and painting or Package B’s technique in visual arts. For eighth-graders, their choices are Package A’s art in the real world and exploring through digital multimedia and animation or Package B’s 2D/3D design. Alatorre said her art classes teach students how to be critical thinkers, develop problem-solving skills and promote self-expression.

Taylor said her ultimate vision is to build upon this new electives program in the near future. She’s interested in perhaps bringing in additional classes such as debate, theater or public speaking. Taylor will also be reaching out to the students to see what other electives they’d like to see added to the curriculum.

“We give children in this age range an opportunity to feel they have a choice,” Taylor said. “We have quite an offering (and we’d) like to put it out there for students to decide where they’d like to see it go. They’re really happy with having the choices.”