No homework is allowed, but lots of learning is taking place in exploratory classes at Rye Middle School.

Young adolescents are often eager, excited learners, but once they enter secondary school, their schedules are typically tightly planned and they have little opportunity to choose what they will study. We educators read studies that deal with a waning interest in school as children get older and strive to figure out how to keep them engaged. An elective program at Rye Middle School in Westchester County, NY, may offer hints about the solution.

Traditionally, the sixth-grade students at Rye had very little choice or ownership in their program of studies. They all took language arts, social studies, science, math, a world language, art, technology, music, and physical education. The only choice was which foreign language (French, Spanish, or Latin) to study and whether to be in band, orchestra, or chorus. But three years ago, an opportunity presented itself and that translated into students taking some ownership of a segment of their learning.

Until that point, sixth graders had always taken foreign language every other day, alternating with music. Because of a growing awareness of the global community we live in, the school moved to daily foreign language in grade 6, which created an opening in the sixth-grade schedule. The new schedule shortened lunch from 40 to 25 minutes and has shorter passing times and shorter classes, but core classes are still in 40- or 50-minute blocks.

The teachers were happy about the schedule changes because it brought the sixth-grade schedule into alignment with the seventh- and eighth-grade schedules. But the next challenge was to offer an exciting array of choices for the students, and the sixth-grade teachers were given the responsibility to design new classes.

They responded enthusiastically to the opportunity and designed an exploratory program to let students make choices about what to study. Students have an exploratory elective each semester during sixth grade that meets every other day, alternating with music. There is no homework and no grades in exploratory classes, and students are not pressured into taking particular classes to satisfy state requirements.

During planning, the teachers re-
flected on what they themselves were very interested in teaching and how it aligned with their students’ interests. The following classes are currently in place, and new ideas are always coming up as teachers compete to attract students to classes that they love to teach and students love to take.

The Art and Design of Bookmaking. Drawing on personal interest, the art teacher created a class that integrates visual and commercial art, crafts, global history, and literacy. Through the study of the techniques developed within a variety of cultures, the course provides students with hands-on experience in the art of bookmaking. Students learn the processes that are used to construct a variety of books, such as Japanese bound books, accordion books, origami books, envelope books, flip books, and pop-up books. In addition, students explore the process of producing handmade paper, fictional story and illustration development, animation, and printmaking. After the students create bound books, they write a children’s story and print it in the books they created. The students present their books to the class. Students love the class for its own sake. There is no reward of an A at the end of the term, but they produce work with great pride and are always eager to take their work home to share it with parents and family members.

Creative Writing. An English teacher who loves the creative writing side of language arts but cannot find enough time in his regular classes to really explore the topic designed this course. He focuses on the research and practice of specific literary techniques that will enhance each student’s overall writing style. Students can apply their newly refined skills to various genres. All of the elements of the writing process are stressed through to the completion of the piece. A visitor can always observe students who
I believe that middle school students should feel free to explore subjects without the fear of a low grade. There is too much talk about GPAs among 11 and 12 year olds. The teachers and I have begun a conversation about giving students the option of taking other classes on a pass/fail basis and not limiting the option to the exploratory classes. The teachers of the seventh- and eighth-grade elective courses are concerned that students would place less value on the elective courses if they were not graded. Those teachers also feel their subjects would suffer in status and importance in the minds of the students.

In response, I have suggested that we pilot a system in which students could select any class each year to take on a pass/fail system. The choice would not be limited to the electives. The classes would include math, English, social studies, science, and world language. The conversation has only just begun and there is some resistance to this "radical" change, but when there is such a positive response to learning, there must be lessons to be learned for educators.
Orienteering. Not to be left out of the fun, a physical education teacher introduced Orienteering to the middle school. Orienteering is a lifelong activity in which participants use maps and compasses to navigate to series of locations. It is a great hands-on method of integrating academic concepts with movement and fun. To achieve orienteering missions, students must interact and cooperate with peers. Life skills—such as problem solving, decision making, teamwork, and cooperative learning—are naturally taught during orienteering.

Orienteering can motivate students to become more interested in nature, hiking, map reading, and the outdoors. Students can be spotted navigating inside the school, on the campus, and in the Rye Nature Center. Students are permitted to bring cell phones to the nature center just in case their orienteering skills need honing, but the teacher has not lost a student yet.

I’m All Set
The sixth graders are thrilled to be able to select from these courses. Every spring, the guidance counselor and I visit the fifth-grade students who will enter the middle school. We present the program and surprise the students by telling them that they may choose two of the six courses. Not long ago, a fifth-grade parent shared what happened when she began the conversation about the exploratory program with her child. She wanted to offer guidance and suggestions as to what he should take. The 10-year-old said, “I’m all set,” and proceeded to tell his mom about my visit and why he selected the two courses that he would take in sixth grade.

It is very rare that a parent will ask to change the selection their child has made. The students flourish when they decide what they wish to study. One of the commitments of the program is that there is no homework, and often teachers have to hold the students back from doing extra research, especially for the law class. Some of the teachers are convinced that the students sneak in some extra work at home.

The program is dynamic, and as teachers hear of new student interests or they themselves become passionate about a subject and wish to share it, a new class is designed and proposed to the district’s curriculum council. The joy of learning is truly present at Rye as students have taken responsibility for their learning. PL

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