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MOVIES | 24



MICHELLE LE

Charlotte Christensen, a third-grade teacher at Huff Elementary, has been teaching students how their brains learn new things in her growth mindset curriculum.

Alternative styles praised in local Teacher of the Year winners

By Kevin Forestieri

Two teachers in Mountain View who have taken their teaching techniques off the beaten path, inspiring students and peers alike, have been named Teacher of the Year by Santa Clara County.

Charlotte Christensen, a third-grade teacher at Huff Elementary, and Leo Florendo, a teacher and program coordinator for Freestyle Academy at the Mountain View High School campus, will both be recognized on Oct. 1 at the Campbell Heritage Theatre in Campbell.

Christensen has spent the last year working single-handedly to help Huff Elementary adopt a new curriculum teaching students how their brain works and how to adopt a “growth mindset,” while Florendo has been working at the Mountain

► See **TEACHERS**, page 17

Students' poor test scores prompt call for action

DISTRICT OFFICIALS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAY ACHIEVEMENT GAP IS A HUGE CONCERN

By Kevin Forestieri

There are no two ways about it. School administrators and board members at the Mountain View Whisman School District agreed last week that the achievement gap is a serious problem facing the district, after the first Common Core test results showed performance

issues among the district's low-income and minority students

At the Sept. 17 school board meeting, district staff went graph-to-graph showing how economically disadvantaged students, English learners and students with disabilities lagged significantly behind their peers, with a whopping two-thirds of Latino students failing to meet

the state standards for English language arts and 71 percent falling below the standards for math.

District administrators acknowledged it as a serious problem, but the presentation didn't go without some heavy contextualizing. Superintendent Ayindé Rudolph said the

► See **TEST SCORES**, page 7

El Camino bus-only lanes get boost from new study

INDEPENDENT GROUP SUPPORTS FINDINGS OF VTA'S TRAFFIC ANALYSIS

By Mark Noack

With a final decision just a few months away, a controversial proposal to bring dedicated bus lanes to El Camino Real inched forward on Tuesday, following the release of an independent study on the plan's impacts.

The new third-party review largely upholds findings by the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority that the program known as bus-rapid transit (BRT) would cause only minor traffic disruptions.

With the favorable report in hand, an enthusiastic group of VTA officials dropped a heavy hint that they would recommend that the board of directors approve the full BRT plan stretching from Palo Alto to San Jose later this year.

“It really does look like the best project could be dedicated lanes,” said John Ristow, VTA program and planning director, on Tuesday, Sept. 22. “Really, this is the project that stands out, and we want to do the best project for this corridor.”

VTA officials have championed dedicated bus lanes on El Camino as a way to streamline mass transit, despite fears that it comes at the expense of other motorists. The plan calls for taking away two of El Camino's six lanes, one in each direction, and restricting them to bus use. The \$223-million plan would essentially redraw the layout for El Camino and create 26 new bus stops along the road's median.

Since it was first pitched five years ago, the plan has been a lightning rod, generating more comments and attention than any other current VTA project. Among the hundreds of comments spread across six affected cities, many supporters endorsed the plan as a good step to make public transportation a viable option for more commuters. However, a large and vocal cadre of opponents have complained that VTA was downplaying the plan's side effects. Restricting traffic would worsen an already congested route and send drivers spilling onto side streets, they said.

‘We're happy with these results.’

JOHN RISTOW, VTA PROGRAM AND PLANNING DIRECTOR

VTA planners signaled that this traffic nightmare wouldn't happen although there would be significant impacts. A draft environmental impact report published by VTA staff last year noted that there would be unavoidable disruption to traffic at multiple locations. But from reviewing 240 intersections in the vicinity, transit engineers projected that thousands of commuters would no longer drive on El Camino if bus-rapid transit were implemented.

In Mountain View, for example, VTA planners estimated that by 2018 more than 1,160 drivers would “divert” from solo driving on El Camino during peak traffic times. In other words, those drivers would find an alternative routes or means of transportation. Just under a quarter of these drivers would shift to mass-transit, the VTA report said. Meanwhile, other

► See **BUS LANES**, page 12

INSIDE

ARTS & EVENTS 18 | VIEWPOINT 19 | GOINGS ON 25 | MARKETPLACE 26 | REAL ESTATE 28

TEACHERS

▶ Continued from page 1

View-Los Altos High School District's alternative Freestyle Academy since the very beginning, creating the philosophy of the multimedia-driven program.

Charlotte Christensen

Every other year, tenured teachers in the Mountain View Whisman School District go through a teacher evaluation, with plenty of boxes to check off to make sure teachers are doing a good job in the classroom. And Christensen was having none of that.

Christensen, a high-energy teacher at Huff Elementary, took on the challenge of adopting a new "growth mindset" curriculum in the classroom last year, as part of an alternative to the typical teacher evaluation. The curriculum was later developed into a school-wide adoption of a nine-month set of lessons designed to help kids learn how their brains work.

The growth mindset teaches that people are not born with a fixed level of intelligence, and that struggling to understand

'She really believes that every kid can learn. Period.'

HUFF PRINCIPAL HEIDI SMITH

difficult or unfamiliar concepts can actually improve the brain's ability to learn new things. The concept, based largely off research by Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck, is slowly making headway in public schools.

Huff's new growth mindset curriculum came about when Christensen noticed the new report cards include an evaluation of a student's "perseverance," which is a big component of the growth mindset. If a student is willing to challenge themselves and not get discouraged by failure, they are more likely to have the grit needed to learn new things.

It's tough to measure something like that for a report card, Christensen said, but she was excited by the prospect of being able to bring that idea into the classroom.

"I thought, 'If that's something I can teach, that would be amazing,'" Christensen said.

In looking around on the school's website, Christensen said she found there's an alternative to teacher evaluations — a "self directed" evaluation with which neither she nor Huff principal



MICHELLE LE

Leo Florendo, teacher and program coordinator for Freestyle Academy, helps Kenneth Hamel with the Adobe After Effects program.

Heidi Smith were familiar. She decided that evaluation would be to research, create and pilot an entire set of class lessons that would guide students through growth mindset ideas and give students some elementary ideas about how the brain functions.

In one lesson, students manipulate strings that represent neurons in their brains. Something new that they learn is held up by students as a thin, frail strand, that could either be reinforced by repetition, or weaken and break if neglected. Things students do all the time, like recall their own name, are represented with thick pieces of rope that show students how something can become second-nature if they reinforce it enough.

Over the summer, Christensen took what worked throughout the year to create a set of growth mindset lessons and activities that could be used by the whole school from kindergarten through fifth grade. The school has since embraced the curriculum, with a lesson each month in all of the classes and quotes on the white board each week inspiring students to challenge themselves.

Christensen took on the growth mindset project at the same time she has had to keep up with the new Common Core curriculum, working through thick books to prepare for teaching math to third-grade students. She said it can get a little overwhelming, and she frequently works 10-hour days throughout the early months of the school year.

Smith said the alternative teacher evaluation didn't even need to be that ambitious, but Christensen is always challenging

herself and turned her classroom into a "lab" for the new lessons last year. Above all, she said, Christensen truly believes in the message of the growth mindset, which has helped fuel the work she has put into creating the new curriculum.

"She really believes that every kid can learn. Period," Smith said.

Leo Florendo

It's hard to spot on the Mountain View High School Campus at first, but nestled behind the school, next to the district office, is a thriving multimedia workshop, with juniors and seniors flexing their creative muscles on video projects, books, music videos and documentaries every day.

One of the masterminds behind the program is Leo Florendo, the last of the original staff members when Freestyle Academy first opened its doors as an alternative program at the Mountain View-Los Altos High School District in 2006. At Freestyle, students spend half of their schoolday doing English and two elective classes, with a focus on multimedia projects and creative expression.

Florendo used to teach physics and some math and engineering classes at Los Altos High School, and said the gig felt a little redundant. His new job as a web design and audio engineering teacher, by contrast, has been active each year, with new software, new techniques and some crazy ideas students come up with that he always strives to make a reality.

"It's not stagnant," Florendo said. "Physics can be stagnant — it's basically the same thing over and over again."

Long-term projects, inspired by the students themselves, has been a long-standing tenet at Freestyle that Florendo has focused on for nearly a decade in the program. The classes push students to synthesize lots of information across multiple mediums. In one project, students do a profile of a person in the local community,

'I am just struck by how fortunate the kids are to have a teacher like that.'

VICE PRINCIPAL BILL PIERCE

creating a magazine article with images and graphics. Later in the year students have to take that same information and turn it into a short commercial about the person, and eventually a five- or six-minute video in the film class.

"We didn't want this to just be three classes you take at Freestyle, it's always been, 'Let's work on long-term projects,'" he said.

Alta Vista Principal Bill Pierce, who oversees Freestyle Academy, said Florendo has been a lead teacher at the alternative program and is one of the smartest people he knows.

"Anytime I'm in a conversation with him about what he does, or I hear him talking to a student, I am just struck by how fortunate the kids are to have a teacher like that, and to have a person who is willing to take on that teacher role," Pierce said.

Florendo has also helped to make sure the program remains on the cutting edge of technology, Pierce said, scoring several grants to make sure students aren't using old computers and equipment for their projects. He said Freestyle Academy is designed so that students can go directly into graduate programs or internships in their field of choice, and in order to do that they need to be trained with the most up-to-date technology.

With students coming into Freestyle Academy at ages 17 and 18, Florendo said he believes it's important to get them to learn about what they like — and what they don't like — through first-hand experience. To learn what they are actually passionate about, rather than what they think they want to do. He said some students go into audio engineering and are taken aback by just how technical it is, while others thrive on it.

"At the end of two years they should be able to say with certainty, 'Oh, I really enjoyed web design, so that's what I'm gonna do. But I didn't enjoy animation, so I'm not going to do that,'" Florendo said.

Once students do find their niche at Freestyle and work hard to bring a months-long project together, Pierce said it's obvious the kind of influence Florendo and the rest of the staff have on the the teens.

"It's striking, the diversity of the things they are doing and the passion with which they are doing it," Pierce said. "And a lot of it comes from the teacher." ▀

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