

NEWS

GREENWICH HIGH SCHOOL INNOVATION LAB

# Students find a personal stake in learning

By Paul Schott

Graphing an equation is a personal statement for students in Greenwich High School's Innovation Lab.

Three months into a program that launched at the start of the school year, the 44 sophomores enrolled in "In.Lab" are testing themselves with complex assignments focused on a key question this quarter: "How do I define myself and my role in the world?"

In their science, technology, engineering and math classes, they are working on projects that call on them to write and graph line equations on their laptops to create images representing important parts of their lives. Later in the quarter, they will turn those images into physical objects, with different colors and substances.

Students said the project has challenged them to improve their Algebra II and chemistry skills. With the math portion of the work, they have discovered how graphing dozens of equations eventually produces detailed geometric pictures on their laptop screens.

"At first, I didn't think I'd be able to make an image like this, but once I actually started doing it, it was a lot more fun than I thought it would be," said Riley Ellsworth, a hockey player, who graphed an ice rink and will later make a mini-rink replica with crystallized Epsom salts. "I think it's more fun to do it this way than to just do equations. It's more fun to do it if you care about it."

In.Lab students still take English and social studies classes along with the STEM subjects, but they learn the material in a less structured environment. They have more time to do projects, compared with traditional classes at the high school. The program caters to students with a range of academic abilities and

includes an honors track.

Teachers also encourage the students to take an interdisciplinary approach. Even in the STEM classes, the students do lots of sketching of their images. A recent field trip to the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan to study cubist pieces has also shaped the students' thinking about their projects.

"I've been really impressed to see what they can come up with, given a little bit of freedom," said STEM teacher Brian Walach. "I've got people in Algebra II covering pre-calculus-level topics. As a whole, I'm happy that the projects we've planned have been positive in that sense."

The program also pushes students to develop their public-speaking skills. In February, the students will present their final projects for the identity curriculum unit at the Bruce Museum.

"I really enjoy this project," said Joey Frangione, as he graphed a snowboard. "(It) is really amazing to see that I did this with a calculator."

With the Innovation Lab in its first year, teachers said they expected the transition to take time for some students. A few have dropped out, but the majority have stayed in the program.

"It was very different from what we were used to, but it has been worth it," said Carly Badini.

Emily Gunzburg said she is now managing the deadlines for her assignments much better than she did at the beginning of the school year.

"Through Innovation Lab, I've been able to become more independent and self-advocating for myself," Gunzburg said. "This is a really serious program that is really targeted for anyone who wants to enhance their independence skills and take control of their own learning."

Planning for the Innovation Lab began in the 2014-15 school



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

STEM teacher Brian Walach helps students with equations in the Innovation Lab at Greenwich High School on Tuesday. Innovation Lab students are working on an artistic graphing project in which they come up with a design and write equations to plot the lines on a graph using a computer program.

year, when it was known as the "Results Only School Environment." A Greenwich Alliance for Education grant of \$250,000 funded staffing increases in the past school year for five teachers to teach half the day and spend the other half on research and development. In.Lab received a \$44,500 grant for teacher training for this school year from the Alliance.

School officials plan to add an incoming class of sophomores each year to In.Lab. By the 2017-18 school year, the lab is expected to reach its maximum enrollment, with potentially 270 students in grades 10 through 12.

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Sophomore Joey Frangione writes equations in a notebook while working on a project in the Innovation Lab at Greenwich High School on Tuesday.

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