

Novi fourth-graders create habitats for the Detroit Zoo

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Project based learning is working in Novi schools and a good example of this was a recent student presentation at Village Oaks Elementary.

Over a two-day period late last month fourth-graders at the school gave wrap-up public speaking presentations in front of an online camera for a project they had been working on in conjunction with the Detroit Zoo.

"I thought it was pretty cool," said fourth-grader Mayerlyn Duenas of the project that had students getting into teams to explore animal habitat design for the Detroit Zoo, which gave assistance in teaching students of the possibilities and needs.

Each group learned about a specific habitat and the animals that could live in them. They worked together to design habitat models, which as far as they were concerned had a real possibility of being taken seriously by zoo planners.

"This was awesome to see," said Zoo Education Specialist Adam Dewey. "I'm impressed with what they've done."

The project had them learning to use a variety of methods to successfully complete the design. From writing out a plan, to learning about animals and forming an actual physical model of a habitat, it had them covering all of the bases.

Some of the challenges were figuring out how to work as a team.

For Sreenidhi Saripalli, this was difficult at first because she was in a group of three boys.

"At first it was hard working with three boys because we all wanted to do it our own way, but eventually we got along and came together as a team," she said after her presentation.

Through this type of learning students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge, which in this case was how to design a proper habitat at the zoo.

According to Novi's PBL coordinator Myla Lee, the goal is to allow for some degree of student "voice and choice." Projects are carefully planned, managed, and assessed to help students learn key academic content, practice 21st Century Skills (such as collaboration, communication and critical thinking), and create high-quality, authentic products and presentations.

PBL is a newer initiative over the last couple of years that has helped Novi students engage their learning environment in a well rounded way. Fourth-grade teacher Mandy Pas said its working.

"They have really taken to learning through challenging projects. It offers a purposeful, real world experience that has them learning as individuals and team members," she said.

