

Cassidy: Globaloria Brings New Way to Learn to Silicon Valley

By [Mike Cassidy](#) - [Mercury News Columnist](#) Posted: 07/23/2011 03:00:00 PM PDT

The hardest thing about imagining the future of public education is that the present is so terribly bleak.

Budgets are being slashed, schools closed, teachers laid off. Comparisons of students around the world show that our students are falling behind. Employers, tech industry employers in particular, are squawking about how we simply are not preparing U.S. kids to be the workers they'll need.

How can we think about tomorrow when sometimes it seems we won't last through today?

But maybe the dreary present is exactly why we need to envision a better future. Money will always be a problem, which makes the lack of it a lousy excuse not to try.

We need to embrace experiments -- the riskier, the better. We need to try something new before we lose a generation of minds. Some things will work. Others won't. That's OK. We'll keep the good and toss the bad.

A few Silicon Valley schools are about to try a program that shows some promise in not only getting kids interested in learning (imagine), but also forcing them to exercise the kinds of skills they'll need if they ever hope to get a decent job in the 21st century. It's called Globaloria (hey, I didn't name it) and in essence it turns middle and high school kids into game designers.

The program, developed by the New York nonprofit World Wide Workshop Foundation, requires students to distill concepts they learn in standard classes -- math, science, literature, social studies and other subjects -- and build a game that teaches the concepts to their peers. In the process, students learn to plan, prototype and program. They learn to work together, manage a project. They learn to try and fail -- and try a different way. They learn to blog about their progress and to take suggestions from other Globaloria students in other schools. They learn that they can create something.

And they learn it all in a world where they live -- a world of digital gizmos and social networks; a world of instant feedback, a world where a text or instant message is as comfortable as a conversation.

"Kids are really tech-savvy these days," says Genvieve Dorsey, who's been training this summer to teach Globaloria to fifth- and sixth-graders in the AdVenture science, technology, engineering and math program at Herman Intermediate School in San Jose. "I thought that we needed to step up our game and provide something like this."

The program will launch in the fall at Herman and in a special seventh-grade curriculum at Christopher Elementary School in the Oak Grove district. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Silicon Valley will also run an after-school version at the Levin clubhouse in South San Jose.

Yes, it costs money -- to run Globaloria's digital platform, to train teachers and in some cases to buy computers -- which is where the Globaloria project in Silicon Valley might point to the future in another regard. The program relies on big hitters to help.

Globaloria in the valley will be supported by a three-year, \$950,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which works to promote civic engagement. The plan is to build the program from one that serves 150 students in Silicon Valley at the start to an ongoing effort that reaches 5,000 students three years from now, says World Wide Workshop President Idit Harel Caperton. The goal will require the Knight Foundation's money and more. And so, Caperton is turning to Silicon Valley companies in hopes that they will see how a brilliant workforce works to their advantage.

"Right here in Silicon Valley we have this situation where if we invest two or three years in these kids," she says, "they can be amazing employees right in this region."

The model combining support from schools, foundations and corporations is already working in West Virginia, where 66 schools are participating; and in New York, as a pilot at a middle school; and in Texas, where East Austin College Prep Academy Principal Marisol Rocha says that Globaloria has helped raised test scores in math and writing.

"We have seen some tremendous gains in the writing area and in the higher-level thinking skills," she says.

One key to success at East Austin? A \$243,000 grant from Advanced Micro Devices' foundation, which is paying for two computer labs and helping pay teachers' salaries.

No question this is a dark time for public schools. But the ideas to make things better are out there. And it turns out, so is the money. It's just a matter of getting those who are able to to step up.

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