



IO promotes scientific curiosity at Grant Alt. PS

At Grant Alternative School, students have a friend who helps them find answers to such questions as:

"How are books made?"

"How are computers made?" and

"How can a spider eat bugs and not get sick from the worms?"

The students' friend is IO, named after one of Jupiter's moons and a character in Greek mythology.

IO lives in the school library, has sneakers, is about a metre high, and has an integrated circuit for one eye and a large transistor for the other.

Students can feed questions to IO through a 5 1/4" disk drive slot painted bright orange and gold. The school's Math, Science and Computer committee designed and made IO. Committee Chair and parent Pierre Kerr donated his sneakers to IO.

Students were encouraged to ask IO questions. The committee thought they would get maybe 100 questions during the school year.

One day after IO took up residence in the library in early October, they had 30 questions. By December 5, they had received over 270 questions.

The questions are stored in a database that includes the student's name, classroom, the full question and a classification of the question, says Mr. Kerr.

Finding answers to the questions has been an interesting experience for the parents on the committee, Mr. Kerr says.

So far, 45 answers have been returned to the classroom teachers for distribution to the students. A lot of the answers covered several questions so about 70 questions have been answered.

The five members of the science committee have provided answers, as have other Grant school parents, friends, relatives, and co-workers.

Going on-line to find answers

InterNet has also been a very useful resource. All committee members have FreeNet accounts and use the use e-mail on FreeNet to coordinate answering questions.

The answer to two math questions has been provided by "Dr. Math", dr.math@forum.swarthmore.edu. The NASA SpaceLink is also a favourite place to find pictures and text for space questions.

The committee members try to use reference materials available to the children. Where possible, answers refer to school and public library books and other resources.

Committee members are trying to become familiar with the books in the school library so that the students can find more information than they can provide.

"This has been a great opportunity for the science committee members to get direct involvement with the students' interests," says Mr. Kerr.

"The quality of the questions has been exceptional. We hope that the answers can match their quality. We are also learning a tremendous amount."

Heather Hutchinson and Barry Silmser are teacher representatives on the committee.

Ms. Hutchinson points out how IO has sparked the students' learning.

"It's very important the students ask questions. More often, they're expected to give answers. This process builds curiosity."

Ms. Hutchinson added that students who receive answers from IO can become "experts" on their topic.

"This project has made us realize how much science is an integral part of our lives. Soon IO will teach the students to search (for answers) themselves."



Clockwise, from bottom left: Grant students Martin Newall, Sean Oderkirk, Sheena McLeish and Amy Gray with IO. Absent: Heather Kerr.

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