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NATIONAL NEWS

STEM Education Gets Boost from New Round of Grants

Education Week

By: Erik Robelen

January 20, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2012/01/stem_roundup_new_grants_to_dri.html

Efforts to improve STEM education are getting a boost from several recent announcements, including grants from the National Science Foundation and the Gates Foundation to drive research and development, as well as a new initiative that will send a lucky batch of science teachers down to Costa Rica for an eco-expedition.

First, researchers at the University of Virginia and the Concord Consortium have received a \$1.35 million NSF grant to create new kinds of science lab activities that bridge virtual and real environments, according to a UVA [press release](#).

"Many science classrooms use simulations to demonstrate scientific principles and theories," said Jennifer Chiu, an assistant professor of STEM education at UVA's Curry School of Education, in the press release. "However, students have trouble making connections between the simulations and the real world."

Second, the NSF recently announced a grant competition under its [Computing Education for the 21st Century](#) program.

The work involves three strands, one of which is the lack of computing education at the K-12 level. Through a project dubbed CS 10K, the NSF is seeking to have rigorous academic curricula incorporated into computing courses in 10,000 high schools, taught by 10,000 well-trained teachers. Proposals can target a diverse range of activities, such as developing course materials, pedagogy, and professional development.

The NSF anticipates providing \$13 million per year over three years for the grants. It will award between 13 and 20 grants. The deadline for applications is April 9.

(For more on the challenges of computer science, check out this [EdWeek story](#) about efforts to elevate the status and quality of computing in schools.)

Third, we just learned that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's [Education Arcade](#) is getting \$3 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to design, build, and research a multi-player online game to help high school students learn math and biology.

The game to be developed under this grant will be designed as part of a genre of games in which many players' avatars can interact or cooperate and compete directly in the same virtual world.

"The genre of games is uniquely suited to teaching the nature of scientific inquiry, because they provide collaborative, self-directed learning situations," said associate professor Eric Klopfer from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in a [press release](#). "Players take on the role of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians to explore and explain a robust virtual world."

Finally, the Northrop Grumman Foundation yesterday announced a [new initiative](#) that will provide 16 middle and high school science teachers the chance each year to visit Costa Rica to experience firsthand field collection of biodiversity and climate data, and bring these learning opportunities to their classrooms.

"We believe that providing a hands-on environmental experience to science teachers will give them insight and inspiration that they can pass on to their students," said Sandra Evers-Manly, the president of the foundation, which was created and is supported by the aerospace and defense company, in a press release.

The new program is a partnership between Northrop Grumman Foundation and Conservation International.

Earlier this year, I [wrote about](#) (and participated in) another Northrop Grumman initiative to get science teachers excited about their subjects and to bring that learning back to their schools. The company's foundation recently wrapped up a six-year effort that allowed teachers to get a firsthand taste of the weightless experience astronauts go through when training for space missions.

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Apple Unveils E-Textbook Strategy for K-12

Education Week

By: Jason Tomassini

January 20, 2012

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/20/18apple.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/20/18apple.html?tkn=QOZFAsDj%2BMM7fKK37AngvY1qqwlscNjk%2FQ5h&cmp=clp-edweek)

[tkn=QOZFAsDj%2BMM7fKK37AngvY1qqwlscNjk%2FQ5h&cmp=clp-edweek](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/20/18apple.html?tkn=QOZFAsDj%2BMM7fKK37AngvY1qqwlscNjk%2FQ5h&cmp=clp-edweek)

Apple Inc. announced aggressive new efforts yesterday to move into the K-12 electronic-textbook market, though educational publishers said the biggest news from the move is how the normally disruptive company is likely to help the publishing industry rather than challenge it.

Through a partnership with three major K-12 textbook publishers—McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt—Apple is offering interactive textbooks through its iBooks store at \$14.99 or less. The textbooks feature multimedia elements, including video, three-dimensional graphics, and photo galleries. They also allow students to highlight text to create flashcards and search within a glossary.

The publishers will give Apple a cut of the revenue; 30 percent in the case of individual consumers, and an undetermined amount when selling on a state or district level. It's a mutually beneficial model akin to iTunes, publishers said, not a run around the publishing industry, as had been speculated and hinted at by Apple founder Steve Jobs before his death last year.

"Apple developed the software, but it's our books and our content," said Genevieve Shore, the chief information officer for Pearson Education, based in Upper Saddle River, N.J. Apple's large distribution model allows those books to reach more people, Ms. Shore said, and its advanced Web development and presentation allows for a superior textbook.

At the characteristically sleek announcement yesterday from the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Apple Senior Vice President Phil Schiller and other officials demonstrated a science textbook, [Life on Earth](#), created for the iPad by the renowned scientist E.O. Wilson. It features 3-D models of a cell that can be rotated by swiping a finger. A larger photograph in the sidebar can then be expanded into full-screen mode for a closer look, a move that elicited applause from the crowd at the event.

Apple also unveiled a brand-new application called iBooks Author, which allows users to create and publish their own e-books. The tool can be used only on Macintosh computers, but books can immediately be published into the iBooks store. Using an interface similar to other Apple applications like iMovie or GarageBand, users can import media into the program and drag and drop it onto a blank page. Users can create custom glossaries and custom widgets that allow for greater interactivity.

Lastly, Apple announced it is upgrading [iTunes U](#), its directory for educational content for higher education, to allow teachers to create entire online courses. Eddy Cue, Apple's senior vice president of Internet software and services, said iTunes U is also now expanding to the K-12 market.

Textbook Disruption?

In its entirety, the announcement signals Apple's intent to further deepen its market share in K-12 education. Sales of the iPad are outpacing Mac computers in the education sector, and [Apple officials said](#) there were 1.5 million iPads in use in education, more than 1,000 one-to-one iPad computing initiatives in K-12, and 20,000 education apps in the iTunes store.

Critics still question, however, whether iPads improve learning, and there are few independent studies offering data to prove that they do.

Mr. Jobs had always taken an interest in education, and in Walter Isaacson's 2011 biography of the technology innovator, [he is quoted](#) as speaking of a "corrupt" state textbook-approval process, the massive textbook industry, and his hope to transform it.

For textbook publishers, though, business won't be as disrupted as Mr. Jobs may have hoped.

Ms. Shore of Pearson Education said creating content for Apple would be no different from creating any other kind of textbook content. Pearson creates the content first, then adapts it to multiple platforms, whether it's Apple, Android, Amazon, or print.

And publishers believe that regardless of the technology (or the user-generation tools), they will still be relied upon to create useful content.

"The common myth is that anybody can create quality content and curriculum," said Lisa O'Masta, the vice president of STEM marketing—products for science, technology, engineering, and math—at New York City-based McGraw-Hill. "The reality is there's a lot that goes into what curriculum is created."

That leaves the accessibility issues up to the publishers, which have to provide high-quality content across multiple platforms, not companies like Apple that offer the platforms, Ms. Shore said.

Some educational technology experts agreed.

"It's not whether the tablet or iPad is beneficial; it's the content," said John Bailey, a former director of educational technology for the U.S. Department of Education under President George W. Bush and now an educational technology consultant.

The bottom line, at least for the major publishers, doesn't stand to change much either, Ms. O'Masta said. A traditional textbook that costs nearly \$100 is updated every five years or so, requiring the school to buy new ones. E-textbooks can be updated at any time, and students must purchase them every school year. Even with the cut going to Apple, there's not likely to be a major difference in revenue.

Publishers wouldn't speculate on whether they would bundle in certain devices when selling textbooks at the district level. For districtwide textbook purchases, students will be given a code to access books on their devices.

Apple-Only Concerns

But some critics believe the cost of the devices could prevent the innovative textbooks from being used by the students who need them most. By the end of the year, for example, McGraw-Hill will produce five Apple-only textbooks. If the textbooks can be used on Apple devices only, it could require cash-strapped districts to decide on Apple or a lesser education.

"Unless the economy significantly improves and the state governments have a load of money, I'm not sure where the districts will find money for \$400 devices, and textbooks," said Osman Rashid, the chief executive officer and co-founder of [Kno](#), an e-textbook company in Santa Clara, Calif., that focuses on higher education.

Ultimately, Mr. Rashid said, Apple's plans will have an overall positive effect on education because it will help prove the value of interactive textbooks and learning. Plus, it will provide more competition in a crowded but important area.

"May the best product win," he said.

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STATE NEWS

Petty Differences Mask Consensus on Teachers

New York Times

By: Ginia Bellafante

January 20, 2012

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/nyregion/more-agreement-than-disagreement-on-how-to-assess-teachers.html?ref=education>

Popular culture has surely produced no more satirical a view of that great scourge of public progress, the Apathetic Teacher, than last year's bluntly titled comedy "[Bad Teacher](#)." In the film, Cameron Diaz plays Elizabeth Halsey, a junior high school teacher so incompetent and chemically regulated that she shows movies all day, barely registers one student's slapping another with coleslaw and steals the answers to a state-administered exam. A bonus of \$5,700 is to be given to the teacher whose students score highest on the test, and Halsey pursues it to pay for her adventures in plastic surgery. Perhaps you watched the movie wondering whether it had been subsidized by a political action committee aimed at dismantling the teachers' union.

Regarding teachers' unions with a certain distaste, maintaining the belief that they exist to champion inadequacy, is now virtually required for membership in the affluent, competitive classes, no matter an affiliation on the right or left. Over the past two weeks, as [Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg](#) have aggressively pushed for phasing in a new, more rigorous teacher evaluation process — with tens of millions of dollars in state and federal aid to schools at stake — they have deployed a rhetoric of enmity, one meant to suggest that the state's teachers' unions are committed to keeping talentless hacks in jobs they can't handle. As the governor put it on Monday, "Our schools are not an employment program."

What has been lost in these performances of reproach and imperiousness is the extent to which the city and state, and the related unions (the [United Federation of Teachers](#) in the first instance and [New York State United Teachers](#) in the second) [are](#)

[generally in agreement over how classroom evaluations ought to be held](#) and what, in fact, constitutes sound teaching. As it happens, the state union was at work devising substantive evaluation reform [more than a year before](#) Mr. Cuomo even took office.

The history unfolds as follows: In 2010, the state passed a law requiring school districts to institute new teacher evaluation systems to replace the thumbs-up-thumbs-down, Siskel & Ebert model that previously prevailed. The new system would tie 40 percent of a teacher's rating to standardized test scores and 60 percent to observations of the teacher in class.

Keeping the new assessment protocols from operating right now — something the mayor and governor seem so desperately to want — are not vast differences in philosophy but nagging disagreements over bureaucratic implementation: at the city level, a dispute between the United Federation and the Department of Education over how appeals of poor teacher ratings might be arbitrated, and at the state level, a lawsuit filed by the union against the Board of Regents for pushing the 2010 law beyond its intent. [A decision handed down](#) last summer in State Supreme Court in Albany sided largely with labor, but the state chose to pursue the time-depleting course of an appeal nevertheless.

Where a great deal of consensus lies is around the ideas of a woman named [Charlotte Danielson](#), who 16 years ago created a method for evaluating teachers that judges them according to four domains, each with numerous categories and subcategories: the quality of questions and discussion techniques; a knowledge of students' special needs; the expectations set for learning and achievement; and the teacher's involvement in professional development activities. The section for assessing the strength of the classroom-learning environment has 15 criteria — down to the placement of furniture.

Ms. Danielson's program, which also trains principals in how to properly execute the evaluations, is already being used in several states and on a pilot basis in 140 New York City schools (though in the experimental phase the outcomes will have no consequence). In November, [a study out of the University of Chicago](#) that looked at Ms. Danielson's method as it was practiced in Chicago schools determined that it was not only a considerable improvement over an old evaluation system but that, just as significant, it established a shared definition of what good teaching was.

Ms. Danielson, who runs her own educational consulting firm in Princeton, N.J., is perfectly suited to appeal to potentially opposing sides in the debates about education reform. As an Oxford-trained economist, she thinks both entrepreneurially and progressively. In the late 1960s she gave up research stints at the Council of Economic Advisers and the Brookings Institution to work as a teacher in Washington's ailing public school system.

"If all you do is judge teachers by test results," she told me when I visited her this week, "it doesn't tell you what you should do differently."

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, speaks about Ms. Danielson almost as though he were producing an infomercial for her. "I taught for 13 years, and I would have loved to have been trained in this method," he said. "I have no doubt it would have made me a better teacher." And yet he, too, is capable of the kind of retaliatory small-mindedness that so often halts the momentum of winning ideas. So offended was he by the mayor's "obnoxious" attitude toward the union in his [State of the City address](#) that Mr. Mulgrew disinvited the Education Department from sessions in which principals were being trained in Ms. Danielson's methods.

While the intensity around evaluation reform is ultimately a very good thing, it sidesteps something crucial: that we can't attract the best and the brightest teachers without drastically changing the status of the profession. Paying good teachers more is important — and the mayor, admirably, has committed to doing that — but money isn't solely at issue. Each year hundreds of intelligent people in their 20s move to apartments in Astoria and lofts in Greenpoint with their degrees from Oberlin and Brown and the University of Michigan to pursue glamorous work that often pays excruciatingly little — assisting documentary filmmakers, assisting assistants at prestigious magazines. Some of their friends may go to Teach for America, but many of them will do their two years and move on.

Maybe what teaching needs is a new movie that makes it seem as hot as Condé Nast.

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Spending \$2,159 Less Per Student, Online School Outscores Florida Campuses on AP Exams

Sunshine State News

By: Kenric Ward

January 23, 2012

<http://www.sunshinestatenews.com/story/spending-2159-less-student-online-school-outscores-florida-campuses-ap-exams>

Online students at Florida Virtual School outperformed their traditional-school peers on Advanced Placement tests in 2011, and at less cost, new studies show.

Florida Virtual School reported scores that averaged 12 percentage points higher than conventional high schools on the 2011 AP exams. The Internet-based school offered 15 AP courses to 3,053 students, an 18 percent increase from the previous year.

Some 58 percent of FLVS test-takers achieved qualifying scores of 3, 4 or 5, compared with 46 percent at conventional

campuses around Florida. The FLVS success rate matched the national average.

Breaking down the results:

- FLVS students were above the state qualifying AP averages in 11 of 15 courses.
- FLVS students were above the national qualifying AP averages in six of the courses.
- AP Environmental Science, in its first year at FLVS, surpassed the state qualifying average by 20 points and the national average by 9 points.
- Minority students accounted for 46 percent of 2011 AP course enrollments at FLVS.
- The highest rates of passage at FLVS were Spanish (95 percent) and Computer Science (93 percent). Traditional schools' best passage rate was 78 percent in Calculus BC (where FLVS students scored at 88 percent).
- Conventional-school passage rates beat FLVS in Biology (36-28 percent, FLVS' lowest score); U.S. History (39-35); Calculus AB (49-44); and English Language & Composition (54-53).

"The Advanced Placement exam results provide a good indicator as to how well Florida Virtual School students are performing," stated Star Kraschinsky, FLVS' director of communications. "We are so proud of our students and teachers for all of their hard work and accomplishments."

Founded in 1997, FLVS' K-12 instructional program is operated under the guidance of a seven-member board of trustees appointed by the governor. With enrollment inside and outside the Sunshine State, the school calls itself "the largest provider of Internet-based courseware and instruction for middle and high school students in Florida and around the globe."

A separate national study showed that Internet-based instruction like that offered by Florida Virtual School is delivered at a fraction of the cost incurred by conventional campuses.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute found "faculty and administration" costs at online schools run around \$2,500 per pupil, compared with \$6,500 at traditional schools. Not surprisingly, "school operations" costs also were lower online.

On the other hand, virtual schools spend as much or more on "student services" and "content" while expending roughly three times more on "technology."

Totaling the five spending categories, Fordham calculated that traditional schools nationally spend an average of \$10,000 per student while online schools cost just \$6,400 per pupil.

Kraschinsky said FLVS, with an average cost of \$6,999.38 per full-time equivalent student, runs \$2,158.86 less per FTE than conventional schools in Florida.

"At day's end, the promise of online learning is twofold: More effective uses of technology have the potential both to improve student outcomes and to create a more productive educational system," the Fordham study concluded.

See Fordham's findings [here](#).

Learn more about Florida Virtual School [here](#).

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California Gov. Brown sharply differs from Obama on education policy

Los Angeles Times

By: Howard Blume

January 20, 2012

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-brown-school-testing-20120120.0.4956654.story>

Deviating sharply from education reform policies championed by [President Obama](#), California Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) is calling for limits on standardized testing and reduced roles for federal and state government in local schools.

Brown's positions, outlined in Wednesday's State of the State address, align closely with the state's two major teachers unions, but also embody Brown's independent streak.

The governor's call for a reduction in standardized testing comes at a time when such tests are gaining influence across the nation, due in part to heavy federal support. Most notably, U.S. [Secretary of Education](#) Arne Duncan has called for results from these tests to become part of a teacher's evaluation.

"It is time to reduce the number of tests and get the results to teachers, principals and superintendents in weeks, not months," said Brown, who hasn't articulated where he stands on teacher evaluations.

Much of the attention to Brown's speech focused on painful budget cuts and a proposed tax increase as well as the expensive high-speed rail project that he supports. But Brown also delivered important cues on education, which consumes more of the state budget than any other program.

A recent USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll suggested that voters would raise their taxes to increase funding for schools, which have suffered steep cuts during the economic recession. Brown's signature tax initiative gambles on this sentiment. It would make education the chief beneficiary of new taxes — and, as Brown made clear Wednesday, the primary target for cuts should his proposed ballot measure fail in November.

But his attention to education goes beyond funding. Besides taking on testing, Brown called for getting the federal and state government out of the details of schooling.

"What most needs to be avoided is concentrating more and more decision-making at the federal or state level," Brown said. "We should set broad goals and have a good accountability system, leaving the real work to those closest to the students.... We should not impose excessive or detailed mandates."

Brown can't unilaterally limit testing, but his views are influential within a generally friendly Legislature, which has responsibility for approving changes to education law. Also, Brown appoints members to the state Board of Education, which oversees the writing and interpretation of education rules.

Observers from across the ideological spectrum have found things to like, worry and puzzle over in Brown's address.

One interpretation is that "the governor recognizes we need to move beyond the first generation of accountability to something more sophisticated," said Dominic Brewer, a USC professor of education, economics and policy. "A more cynical read seems to suggest the governor is against testing and even would prefer a return to an era where frankly there was little accountability for outcomes. It's hard to tell which view he holds."

Former L.A. school board member Yolie Flores expressed dismay at Brown's approach.

"He essentially is saying that neither the state nor the feds should be involved, and instead let's leave it to the schools at the local level," said Flores, who now heads a local education-advocacy group. "I've been at schools at the local level, and there is much lacking there in terms of leadership, capacity and ability to improve things."

Brown expressed his views on testing and local control more bluntly when speaking to The Times' editorial board late last year.

The tests take "too damn long," Brown told the board. "Second-graders take five days of tests. That's longer than I spent on the bar exam. I think that's absurd. You've gotta have some room for creativity."

He was similarly insistent about limiting the role of Washington.

"The federal government should butt out," Brown said at the time. "You have more and more people who aren't teaching, who are managing the flow of the money and all the various rules and mandates."

"They have this idea that schools are like businesses and if you set the right metrics, can you reward and punish and you get the outcome," Brown said. "I don't feel things quite work that way."

Brown's criticism of the growing emphasis on standardized tests has found a receptive audience among California teachers.

"The governor's speech demonstrated a respect for the practitioner," said Dean Vogel, president of the California Teachers Assn. "We've been waiting to hear that from a governor," he added, in a dig at Brown's predecessor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Schwarzenegger's positions were a nearer match with Obama's Department of Education, which has awarded funding to states that adopt favored policies, such as linking student test scores to teacher evaluations or converting low-performing schools to independent, and typically nonunion, charter schools.

It remains unclear how Brown would assess schools if testing is relegated to a diminished role. Some options include classroom visits and a more rigorous accreditation process, said state Board of Education President [Michael Kirst](#), a Brown appointee.

In his address, Brown also touted a new school funding method, called "weighted student formula," which is part of his budget proposal. Its goal is to allocate more funding based on individual student needs. Those challenged by poverty, disability or limited English-speaking skills would have additional dollars assigned to their education.

At the same time, more than 60 separate education programs would be sharply reduced in number, with their rules simplified.

"This will give more authority to local school districts to fashion the kind of programs they see their students need," Brown said. "It will also create transparency, reduce bureaucracy and simplify complex funding streams."

Overall, school districts such as L.A. Unified, where most families are low-income, should see a significant boost of dollars under the governor's plan, said Bruce Fuller, a [UC Berkeley](#) professor of education and public policy.

At the same time, proposed budget cuts, such as one that eliminates funding to transport students to school, would reduce funds that previously benefited L.A. Unified.

"I don't see an enlarging pie of funding," said L.A. schools Supt. John Deasy.

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New Mexico: Learning Curve: Making sense of the school grades

The Santa Fe New Mexican

By: Robert Nott

January 22, 2012

<http://www.santafenewmexican.com/Local%20News/Making-sense-of-the-grades>

New Mexico got a C twice last week.

On Jan. 10, the state's Public Education Department released preliminary data for New Mexico's roughly 830 schools under the new A-to-F grading system: 32 percent received A's and B's, 32 percent received C's, and 36 percent received D's and F's. Overall, the state earned a C.

Two days later, Education Weekly's annual Quality Counts report, which measures each state's educational system based on several factors -- including K-12 achievement, school finance, teacher quality, and standards, assessment and accountability -- gave New Mexico a C. Which is what the entire country scored in that report too.

Noted the report: "The nation receives a C when graded across the six distinct areas of policy and performance tracked by the report, the most comprehensive ongoing assessment of the state of American education. For the fourth year in a row, Maryland earns honors as the top-ranked state, posting the nation's highest overall grade, a B-plus. Perennial strong finishers Massachusetts, New York and Virginia follow close behind, each receiving a B. Nearly half the states, however, receive grades of C or lower."

Highly touted Florida ranked 11th and got a C-plus (about a 79, compared to New Mexico's 76.3, which placed us 31st in the report). South Dakota was at the bottom, with a 66.1, earning a D-plus.

To access the report online, visit Google "*Education Weekly* and Quality Counts."

Along these lines, here's a bit of dialogue I recorded between me and a smiling fifth-grader when I stopped in teacher Shelby Gernon's class at Ramirez Thomas Elementary School last week:

Girl: We got an F!

Me: Did you deserve it?

Girl: No. We don't feel we're an F.

Also on Jan. 12, I reported on Santa Fe Public Schools' efforts to illuminate and address the problem of bullying in its schools (Google "District taskforce takes on bullying"). A few days later, I came across a new report on the issue, "Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States," put out by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network that is based on surveys of 1,065 elementary-school kids in grades three to six and about 1,100 elementary-school teachers in grades K-6.

The report goes beyond just gay and lesbian students, noting that 75 percent of elementary-school kids report that students at their school are bullied, called names or made fun of on a regular basis, and that about half of the teachers believe that bullying, harassment or name-calling is a serious issue at their school.

This lengthy (125 pages) document ends with a chapter spotlighting the importance of professional development for teachers to deal with the problem beyond just sending the offender to the principal's office. The report notes that more than eight out of 10 teachers report having received professional development in bullying and harassment -- an idea Santa Fe Public Schools' student-wellness team is considering.

Google "Playgrounds and Prejudice" or "GLSEN" to access the report.

Monte del Sol Charter School, a charter for students in grades seven to 12 that opened in 2000, will host an admissions open house at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 25. Teachers and students will be on hand to answer questions.

The school, at 4157 Walking Rain Road in the Nava Adé neighborhood off Richards Avenue, has an application deadline of March 23, and the lottery drawing is March 28. About 360 students attend the school. Visit www.montedelsol.org and click on the Admissions link for more information. (Incidentally, that school received an A under the state's new grading system.)

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