

Keeping the kids focused

BY MICHAEL NOLL

PERHAPS YOU'VE HAD THIS experience: You come up with a fun activity for your child or grandchild to work on while stuck at home during the pandemic. It's something your kiddo is excited about, and you find time to work with them on it — and then nothing happens. Your child loses interest. The project fizzles.

AT HOME WITH TWIRL *and Friends*

One of the biggest challenges of remote learning for families is that teachers are not standing over their students' shoulders, making sure they stay focused. There are so many ways to get distracted and lose motivation. The same is true of informal projects that aren't for school. When students don't have to do them, they often don't. Our educational system as it has existed for decades requires deadlines, grades and strict supervision.

The pandemic has wrecked that system.

At the Peñasco school district, our after-school programs through the community schools initiative have faced this same problem. Here are six strategies we are using to try to solve it:

Define the parameters of the project

Our two most successful programs are a school podcast and a coding club. In both, the leaders have determined the basic outlines of the program. For the podcast, students create 2-minute videos that are compiled into a weekly broadcast. For the coding club, students use the Scratch platform to create animations. Leaders teach basic skills and then give the students specific tasks to complete within their own projects.

Give students power of their projects

Kids are no different than adults: they get excited about things they like and bored by things they don't like. For the podcast, students have made videos about the NFL, Fortnite and other

video games, jokes, their Halloween costumes and cooking. In our coding club, the original plan was to focus on helping students create animated stories about themselves and famous New Mexicans. But it became clear that students were more interested in designing games. We started with a maze and moved into designing our own versions of well-known games like Crossy Road. When working with students on a project, it's important to keep an open mind. Leave room for students to steer the direction the project takes.



COURTESY IMAGE

4th-grade student Dante Lopez created this maze game using the Scratch coding program from MIT. The program is led by Northern New Mexico College professor Steve Cox, in partnership with the Embudo Valley Library.

ideas. Bounce ideas around. This is how creativity works: we get ideas from talking to others.

Offer examples

It's difficult to create a project when you've never seen a finished version. The internet is great for finding examples of all sorts of fun activities. But the examples don't need to be photos or videos. They can also be mental pictures inspired by brainstorming sessions. Take some time to explore possibilities with your kids. Sketch out

ideas. Bounce ideas around. This is how creativity works: we get ideas from talking to others.

Inspire first, then worry about logistics

Try asking "what if?" questions: "What if we did this?" Don't worry about whether the ideas are possible or not. Once you stumble upon an idea that excites your child, direct your brainstorming toward ways to pull it off given the materials and time available. Don't stomp out good ideas before they flower. Let them grow before pruning them down to size.

Become a mini expert
None of the school staff helping students with these programs is an expert in making videos or coding. But we have taken the time to learn enough to stay just ahead of our students so that we can help them. And when we encounter something we don't know? We admit the limits of our knowledge and work with the students to figure

out solutions. Ignorance isn't an end but a beginning, an opportunity to learn together. Ask your kids for their own ideas about how to solve problems.

Set a schedule – but be flexible

For both after-school programs, our students meet at regular days and times. However, inspiration and energy don't always follow a schedule. The club leaders have all met remotely with students one-on-one to work on these projects. The most important thing is to feed the students' interest in the project and to help them progress and see that progress.

As a result of these strategies, these Peñasco school programs have a high rate of participation, and students are getting excited about the projects they are making. In fact, participation is increasing, rather than decreasing, as is often the case in these trying times. Give students the framework to explore their creativity and the power to help lead the project, and they will respond!