Stonewall Middle using computer games to teach reading - with great results

By JAN DAVIS
Observer staff

At Stonewall Middle School something unique is taking place in Literacy Coach Elizabeth Jones’ three reading classes with the use of gaming to enhance the students’ motivation and learning.

Last year Jones partnering with Vera Lichtenberg, Founding Director George Mason Game & Technology Academy and Shipley Owens, a graduate of the program, developed a curriculum using strategies that use gaming to teach many of the SOL skills the students need to achieve such as main idea, supporting details, cause and effect, climax, predictions, character development, theme, as well as inference and context clues.

Jones said, “I have three classes with approximately 20 students each... In these classes I teach reading strategies to support and develop critical literacy skills and meet the Standards of Learning.”

Last year, Jones piloted the program with her eighth-grade class and this year has included all of her grade levels. She has been collaborating with Shipley Owens from George Mason Game & Technology Academy, to write the first interactive digital literacy curriculum for PWCS.

Lichtenberg explained, “Level Up with Literacy: Writing for Games is a curriculum that integrates STEM and literacy, for sixth, seventh and eighth grade Stonewall Middle School students, by providing reading and writing instruction using computer games as foundational texts. The connection between games and reading and writing is used to read, discuss, and analyze a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts, both print and digital, in order to build literacy skills and promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills.”

Jones has used as one of the resources for the curriculum, What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy by James Paul Gee. He explains people do not read everything in the same way. Newspapers, legal tracts, poetry, rap songs as well as numerous other reading material are read differently. Gee says, “Each of these domains has its own rules and requirements. Each is a culturally and historically separate way of reading and writing, and, in that sense, a different literacy.”

Jones was further inspired to develop the curriculum after she talked to her students about the games they played.

She said, “Within minutes, students who avoided participating in class begin discussing games, point-of-view and their opinions about the game.”

“It was at that point I realized my misconceptions about games were preventing me from helping my students connect with literacy and their world. So, I began developing a curriculum that revolved around game design to encourage engagement and motivation in my class.”

Eric Simenauer, SMS counselor, has seen the benefits of Jones’ curriculum because of the infusion of gaming into other aspects in the school, not only from the technology area, but in all areas of STEM.

He said, “I am presently weaving it into my own counseling program.”

Simenauer, Jones and Kaitlin Fick, SMS computer teacher, periodically meet with the George Mason Game & Technology Academy, to partner together to create lessons that are meaningful and to share them with other teachers and at Mason Game and Technology Academy.

The students are motivated and excited about using gaming to help them with their literacy skills.

Angel said, “This class has helped me understand new strategies that I can use when reading.”

Andy added, “This class has helped me discover how fun reading can be.”

Jones said, “Students begin to have a more positive attitude about reading and school, students feel valued and important and last year, seven out of 12 students passed their reading SOL.”

Lichtenberg has also seen the impact the curriculum has had and shared in the Mason Game and Technology Academy newsletter, “This project began in 2017, with an initial class pilot consisting of 12 students... all had failed their SOL’s the previous year. Five of the students had not passed a reading SOL since fifth grade. At the end of the pilot, 38 per cent of the students passed the 2016-17 Reading SOL, ten students showed an increase in their reading SOL scores, and a follow up meeting... with these students found them all passing their high school English classes with A’s or B’s.”