

BY ROBERT KLEPPEL

The ***Terrible, Awful, Dreaded*** Saturday Announcement

Worse than late homework problems or an extra school-night meeting is the announcement—the terrible, awful, dreaded Saturday or Sunday 8th-grade child’s “Mo-om, I have to do my science project today. I have to hand it in on Monday.”

Instantly visionary, the parent (for the announcement can also be addressed to “Da-ad”—or another family member) now waves good-bye to any hope for weekend peace. Too often, sadly, this announcement means activation of parents’ own long-dormant middle-school science project fears. At this special moment even patient, experienced parents can rarely resist, as their eyes narrow, at least saying “And how long have you had *this* assignment?”

The reality is, however long the child has had the assignment, it is now the weekend before the project is due and way, way too late to begin meaningful work. *Something* may well be handed to the teacher on the Monday following but the student, and the parent, have lost out on invaluable learning time and experience. And they have lost out since well before this 8th-grade project was assigned.

While there are some students who put off almost any assignment as long



as possible and who may require especially skilled coaching to change this pattern, acquiring information and skills early at home and at school is a way of increasing the chances that they will feel secure and able as school assignments become progressively more demanding.

To be learning initially about science projects during the 8th grade—frequently the time students are assigned them as “exit projects”—means that students have already missed out on years of building science knowledge and acquiring skills. They have missed out, too, on the benefits yielded by the practice of applying such knowledge and skills.

Investigating Beginnings

So, when *is* the right time to start? As written into the New York City science performance standards, science investigation begins in elementary school. As children start school is the right time for them to start building science knowledge and project skills. The standards’ language describing student-initiated scientific investigations is overarching, stating that students should be conducting “at least one full investigation each year” from elementary through

high school levels (see text box).

Further, while students are not expected to conduct research using controlled experimental designs until middle school, all students should be familiar with “a) a fair test, b) a systematic observation such as a field study [and] c) a design, such as building a model or scientific apparatus” and they should conduct “d) non-experimental research using print and electronic information, such as journals, video, or computers” (Board of Education, 1999, p. 206).

STANDARD S8, SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

The student [elementary, middle and high school] demonstrates scientific competence by completing projects drawn from the following kinds of investigations, including at least one full investigation each year and . . . investigations that integrate several aspects of Science Standards 1 to 7 and represent all four of the kinds of investigation. . . .

—Board of Education, 1999, p. 206.

When students in all elementary grades are supported, through activities in the classroom and at home, in acquiring the skills that lead up to the complex abilities and knowledge that go into an 8th-grade project, by 8th grade there will not be a dreaded announcement, but an excited one: “Guess what I am doing now for my science project?” How can we as teachers and parents support our children/students? One way is to offer them activities that integrate learning benefits. A sample follows.

Integrating the Internet, Science and Reading

“Which Internet sites can best support our children’s learning?” This question is often asked by both parents and educators.

One right answer is the Rainforest Alliance Web site (www.rainforest-alliance.org). When using this site children can:

- Read and view.
- Learn more about science, society and the global environment.
- Conduct searches for additional information, including Web sites.

FOR KIDS AND TEACHERS

The Rainforest Alliance Web site devotes much space to a section it calls “Kids and Teachers.” Complex issues are presented simply here but not oversimplified. Young surfers have many choices—“Online Rainforest Stories,” “The Frog Pond,” “Tropical Coloring Book,” “School of Amazon Painting,” “Rainforest Activities” and “Resources for Kids.” Educators and parents can also benefit from an entire section called

“Learning Site.” “Kids and Teachers” and “Learning Site” are both accessible from the main page.

The whole site is a primary source, stocked with information to be viewed, read and absorbed. One example is the coloring book, whose pages can be downloaded for younger viewers to color in; it can be used as well by older children who are illustrating a tropical bird project or report.

The site is also a gateway—to other Web sites from around the globe, illustrating the alliance’s mission to build global citizenship. Click on “Resources for Kids” in the “Kids and Teachers” section. Or click on “Links” on the main page.

And rainforest-alliance.org is definitely child friendly. For example, the Web sites listed in “Links” are coded with frog symbols if they are suitable for children.

INCLUDE GEOGRAPHY

One recommendation to enable students to learn global geography and to better visualize the locations in the world to which they are cyber-traveling is to show them how to download maps. They can refer to these as they read and search. Click on “Adopt-a-Rainforest” on the main page, pick a project, click on it and you will find a map. Under these maps are links for more detailed maps available through Encarta.

The Rainforest Alliance site has won many awards (including approval by Nana Ellen as a “Kid Safe Site”). Go there to see why!

ABOUT THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE

This statement and much more information about the alliance can be read by clicking on “About Us” on the site’s main page:

“The Rainforest Alliance is a leading international conservation organization. Our mission is to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that live within them by implementing better business practices for biodiversity conservation and sustainability. Companies, cooperatives, and landowners that participate in our programs meet rigorous standards for protecting the environment, wildlife, workers, and local communities. The Rainforest Alliance is based in New York City, with offices throughout the United States and worldwide” (January 2004).

REFERENCE

Board of Education of the City of New York. (1999). *New Standards™ Performance Standards: Science* (1st New York City ed.). New York: Board of Education of the City of New York.

