**A letter to my students and parents about Genius Hour**

Dear Students and Parents,

I wanted to write to introduce an unusual project we’ll be doing the last half of the school year.

It is a unique learning experience called Genius Hour. This is a major project-based-learning assignment that will take place on most Mondays throughout the rest of the year and encourages students to pursue a creative interest.

**How does Genius Hour Project Work?**

**Brainstorming**

At the beginning of the project, students will begin brainstorming ideas for a project proposal. While brainstorming, I will encourage students to focus on something they are passionate about and want to learn more about. They will be challenged to “Make an Impact” with what they decide to research. I will share various stories, ideas and motivational possibilities students can use as they formulate their own project proposal. The goal is to have an idea by the end of January.

**Proposal**

Once the students have an idea of what project they want to pursue, they begin writing the proposal. This is how they will “pitch” the project to me and the rest of the class. In this proposal, students will answer the following questions.

* What is your topic and project?
* Who is the audience for this project?
* Why is this project worthwhile?
* What do you expect to learn from this project? How is research involved?
* What IMPACT (or product) will you have to show at the end of the year?

**The Blog**

Each day that we participate, every student is required to write a blog post where they discuss their progress. They write about what happened over the past week, what they learned, what challenges they faced, and what they anticipate in the future.

**Audience**

The most powerful part of personalized learning and raising the bar of motivation is an audience. I would like to see each student utilize an adult audience who can help guide and inspire them along the way. I hope parents will play a role in offering advice, provide informal leadership, and follow the progress blogs. As we go along, I will be asking parents to help share insight and responses to students’ posts about their projects. This is the most powerful part of the entire process, an authentic audience. Believe me, it is much better than an audience of one, their teacher!

**Genius Hour Days**

Students will have one day a week for Genius Hour to work on their projects. Each Genius Hour day, we will be learning a new skill: writing proposals, pitching ideas, setting goals, putting forth effort, evaluating ourselves, managing time, taking personal responsibility, organizing materials, exhibiting self-control, preparing a presentation, and many more. We will also have work time to be using our new skills to make a contribution to our individual projects.

**The Final Presentation**

At the end of the year, each student will give a five-ten minute presentation to students, teachers, and parents (if you can come) where they will show off their work and the impact they have made. This will be carefully written, choreographed, and rehearsed to produce the best presentation they’ve ever given. These TED-style presentations will be delivered (and hopefully recorded) in the classroom. What is a TED talk? Check out a great talk on [Making a Difference Now, Don’t Wait](http://www.ted.com/talks/mark_bezos_a_life_lesson_from_a_volunteer_firefighter.html).

**Assessment**

How is the Genius Hour project going to be graded? Extrinsic motivators like grades tend to discourage the innovation and creativity I’m looking for in this project. I want them to be inspired by the project itself, not by the grade they’re going to get on it.

With that said, the parts of the project they will be required to complete are as follows:

* **The Proposal** (Is the proposal on-time, and does it address the research question appropriately?)
* **The Blog** (Do the posts meet the required criteria, address the required topic, and are they submitted on-time?)
* **The Impact** (Did you successfully move from idea phase to impact phase, and do you have something to show at the end of the year?)
* **Productivity** (Are you spending your time by actively and passionately working on your project? If not, we need to quickly adjust the project so you are working on something that is intrinsically motivating. This is less objective, but if I see students not being productive, I will intervene.)
* **Final Presentation** (Does your presentation meet all of the required elements?)
* **Self-Evaluation** The students will also be evaluating themselves on their work habits throughout this time. We will have several mini-lessons on habits such as time management, organization, perseverance, effort, and personal responsibility.

I’m excited and hope this will be a way to put all of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills we’ve learned so far to work on a meaningful project for each student. As we go, I’m sure we’ll have some kinks to work out, and I’m sure we’ll all encounter some failure when trying something new. I believe that we often learn more from our failure than we do from our successes; therefore, failures will be used as stepping stones to learning, not grades in the grade book.

Let me know if you have any questions. I’m hoping it will be a great experience for us all.