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From left, Technology Student Association members Destinee Wynn, Daniel Deluca, Devin Flournoy, Aubrey Hudson, Nicholas Orluski and Brian Decker work on advanced computer projects at Buffalo Creek Middle School. Students often work during free time, officials said.

WRITING CODE AT AGE 11

Youngsters create Web sites and edit movie files

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NORTH MANATEE — Educators at Buffalo Creek Middle School are finding that when it comes to teaching advanced computer skills to computer-savvy students, there is no such thing as too young.

In one class, 12-year-old Neil Labelle uses a keyboard and mouse to create a 3-D computer model of his school, accurate right down to the shadow cast by its flagpole. Such designs are used in architecture or in movie production.

In the same classroom, other students write code to create their own Web sites, design an aqueduct and edit movie files to produce podcasts.

In the school's Distance Communication class, children as young as 11 learn how to use professional computer animation and 3-D modeling software. They are required to use computer code to build their own Web sites.

Those skills are not usually taught until high school or even college, but teachers here believe students who already use computers and iPods to communicate and play games are ready to learn skills needed in an increasingly technological job market.

"I taught this curriculum in high school in Texas, and I haven't changed one iota of it," said teacher Richard Platt. "We said, 'Let's see what the kids can do.' So far we haven't run into anything to stop them."

The class is getting rave reviews from students who see their future as video game designers or digital animators for companies like Pixar and Disney. Many of them give up free time twice a week to spend more time on their projects at a gram.



ABOVE: Jake Glassmoyer, 14, an eighth-grader, has created a computer model of a Roman aqueduct in a class at Buffalo Creek Middle School. RIGHT: Teacher Richard Platt guides students' work with Cinema 4D, animations, computer models and iPod broadcasts. Such skills are not usually taught until high school.



View class projects
For a sampling of the work done by Buffalo Creek Middle School technology students, click on the link with this story on www.heraldtribune.com.

"It's just fun making models on the computer and building stuff," said sixth-grader Bobby Tucker, whose realistic 3-D model of a Roman pantheon even lets you look inside.

Buffalo Creek spent \$80,000 equipping the distance communication classroom with computers, software and digital cameras. School district officials said if the class works, it could be offered at other middle schools.

"Show me another place in education where students are giving up their free time to come in and learn," said Doug Wagner, district director of adult, career and technical education. "This is something that students are gravitating toward and new jobs and new careers are being created in."

So far, Manatee has gone younger than other districts



Students in the advanced computer class at Buffalo Creek Middle School keep notebooks on all the projects they do in class.

In Sarasota, digital and Web design is typically taught at high schools, said district spokesman Scott Ferguson. Students, but it is mostly how to use computers, not how to program them or design with them, officials said.

You're never too young to write code

CLASS FROM 1B

Those are regular activities in Platt's classroom at Buffalo Creek. Even with classes over for the day, about 20 students were working Thursday.

One team of students was working on producing a digital movie file that shows the Stars and Stripes fluttering in the wind while the words of the Pledge of Allegiance scroll across the screen. When complete, the movie will be broadcast into every classroom during the morning pledge.

Jake Glassmoyer, 14, was working on adding a flowing

river to a 3-D model of a Roman aqueduct.

"I love doing anything on a computer," said Jake, who hopes to one day work on video games or a "Shrek" movie.

As incentive for students, the walls of the classroom are covered in posters of movies made with computer animation or movies that have a heavy dose of computer-generated special effects.

Platt insists that students do not use the computers for playing games, sending e-mails or surfing the Web.

Platt gets help in the after-school program from Ed Gavin,

who teaches computer animation and 3-D modeling at Ringling College of Art and Design.

"I was expecting some primitive stuff," Gavin said, "but they're taking it and starting to run with it."

This is the first semester for the class, and as it progresses Platt plans to place the students' Web sites onto the Internet. Many of the students' 3-D models will be submitted in statewide contests.

"These kids are so receptive to this," Platt said.

"After three months of doing this, they have no fear. They're doing things so much faster."

SEE CLASS ON 6B