

CLASS NOTES

BY JANINE DEFAO



FREE PARKS, BOOKS, AWARD-WINNING TEENS AND MORE

We highlight new free resources for students and families, and spotlight other education news.

Free Parks Passes

Fourth graders in public schools can get a free pass for their families to visit California's 54 state parks this school year.

The California State Park Adventure Pass allows free entry to state parks for the student, up to three adults and any other kids in a car and is valid from Sept. 1, 2024, to Aug. 31, 2025. It's part of a three-year pilot program. There is also a new, two-year pilot program that allows residents to check out state park passes for day use from local libraries called the State Library Park Pass Program.

Parents and guardians of fourth graders can sign up for the Adventure Pass at ReserveCalifornia.com or call 800-444-7275. For more information, visit parks.ca.gov/adventurepass.

Fourth graders and their families can also get free entrance to national parks through the federal government's Every Kid Outdoors program. Visit everykidoutdoors.gov/index.htm for more information and to sign up.

Free Books for Little Ones

Families with children ages 0-5 in San Mateo County can receive a free monthly book in the mail through a new partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

Founded by the country singer and philanthropist, the book gifting program aims to promote early literacy and preschool readiness, as well as intellectual and emotional success. Parton started the program in her home county in Tennessee in 1995, and it has grown nationally and internationally since then, giving more than 200 million books.

San Mateo residents can register at smcl.org/imagination-libraries. It takes eight to 12 weeks for the first book to

arrive, and then books arrive monthly. Residents in other Bay Area counties can check their eligibility at imaginationlibrary.com/usa/find-my-program.

Award-Winning Teens

Six Bay Area teens have been honored as winners and finalists of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, a national award that celebrates inspiring, public-spirited young people from across the U.S. and Canada.



Charlotte Rosario

Charlotte Rosario, 17, of Hillsborough and Varin Sikka, 16, of Los Altos were both chosen as winners and awarded \$10,000 to support their service work or higher education.

Rosario founded the Community Photobooth, and her collective of young photographers has held more than 550 donation-based photoshoots to raise over \$40,000 for global causes. Sikka invented AirCat, a Direct Air Capture system that could remove carbon dioxide from the air on a large scale and holds the potential to significantly mitigate climate change.



Varin Sikka

Also recognized as finalists were Aaryan Doshi, 17, of Cupertino, who created CirFin, a global initiative that educates young people about a sustainable economy that promotes the reuse, rent, repair and return of products instead of their disposal; Adyant Bhavasar, 13, of San Jose, who developed an eco-friendly, cost-effective and reliable alternative energy source that converts wasted mechanical energy into electricity for powering low-voltage devices such as pacemakers and hearing aids; Andrew Liang, 16, of San Jose, who created Beewell, an AI-driven system

that significantly improves bee colony health monitoring for beekeepers; and Henry Lien, 18, of Mill Valley, who founded ChessPals to provide free chess lessons to underserved youth by training seasoned teen players to teach chess to students at school programs and summer camps.

Two more Bay Area high school students – Divij Motwani, 17, of Palo Alto, and Ayush Garg, 16, of Dublin – recently won a \$5,000 first-place award in the biomedical engineering category at the world’s largest pre-college STEM competition, Regeneron International Science & Engineering Fair (ISEF) 2024.

The duo created OralAI, which locates where cavities will form weeks before they actually do. The device captures pictures of your teeth using a camera and mobile app, where an AI model can identify potential areas of cavity growth. Their invention has the potential to bridge the gap for individuals who are unable to access a dentist regularly in rural areas or developing countries.

Food Dye Ban

California became the first state in the nation to ban six dyes in public school-provided food with Gov. Gavin Newsom’s signature on a landmark bill in late September.

The California School Food Safety Act, authored by Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel, D-Encino, and sponsored by the Environmental Working Group and Consumer Reports, bans Red Dye No. 40, Yellow Dye No. 5, Yellow Dye No. 6, Blue Dye No. 1, Blue Dye No. 2 and Green Dye No. 3 from food provided in schools during regular school hours.

“As a lawmaker, a parent and someone who struggled with ADHD, I find it unacceptable that we allow schools to serve foods with additives that are linked to cancer, hyperactivity and neurobehavioral harms,” Gabriel said in a statement. “This bill will empower schools to better protect the health and well-being of our kids and encourage manufacturers to stop using these dangerous additives.”



Left to right: Emily Tang, Brendan Giang and Max Reiter.

Last year, Gabriel successfully authored, and Newsom signed into law, the California Food Safety Act, which banned potassium bromate, propylparaben, brominated vegetable oil and Red 3 from food manufactured, delivered and sold in the state.

Student Documentary Contest

Middle and high school filmmakers are invited to submit films to CSPAN’s annual StudentCam documentary competition, now in its 21st year, for the chance to share in \$100,000 in prizes.

The theme for this year’s contest – “Your Message to the President: What issue is most important to you or your community?” – asks students to address a topic from multiple perspectives and assess what actions the president should take after Inauguration Day.

The C-SPAN Education Foundation awards 150 student and 53 teacher cash prizes each year. The grand prize winner will receive \$5,000, and other winners will be awarded \$250 to \$3,000.

Last year’s first prize winners include Meital Zayats of Isaac Graham Newton Middle School in Mountain View for “Beyond Just Sci-Fi: AI Reshaping America’s Tomorrow” and Palo Alto High School students Brendan Giang, Emily Tang and Max Reiter for their film “Threads of Change.” That documentary also was chosen for an October screening at the All American High School Film Festival at the AMC Empire 25 theaters in New York’s Times Square in October. Learn more about the students’ organization, National Youth for Sustainable Fashion, at nysf.earth.

Students can enter the C-SPAN contest individually or in teams of up to three. Documentaries must be 5 to 6 minutes long. The deadline to enter is midnight on Jan. 20, 2025.

Winners will be announced in March 2025, with the top winning videos to air on C-SPAN in April 2025. Details are available at studentcam.org.

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