



Photo by BOB GRIESER / Los Angeles Times

Sequoia Elementary sixth-graders have written a book for teachers, with the help of their instructor, Rick Morris, above.

Psst! Some Insider Information

■ **Education:** Some sixth-graders have written a book for teachers, after battle-testing what methods help them do better in school.

By DAVID SMOLLAR
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SAN DIEGO—The next time teachers scour the literature for ways to help their students learn, they might want to pick up a new book written by students for teachers.

If they do, they'll find out about Starburst Math, about the Rainbow Handwriting Award, about Max and E. T., the Minute of Silence, and a host of other tricks, activities, and strategies that the students "battle-tested"—with the result that they study more and enjoy education more.

The book, "School Our Way," is a product of teacher Rick Morris's sixth-grade class at Sequoia Elementary School in Clairemont and will be on sale for \$3 this week at the annual Mentor Teachers Conference in downtown San Diego.

In its introduction, the class says its illustrated guide is chock-full of "20 terrific techniques for a happier, more productive class."

As part of a two-month writing project, the students picked their favorites from the many ideas that Morris uses to create a more exciting class. Those ideas are geared toward involving students in routine teacher chores as well as stimulating them to go beyond the rote recitation still common in many schools.

Not many classrooms, for example, feature "Educational Reserve Notes" in the form of paper money—with Morris's picture smack in

the middle—which students receive for a chore well done or an answer well reasoned. The "notes" are redeemable in a student-run classroom store for snacks and supplies.

Nor do most classes have a "Come-and-Get-It-Chuck-Wagon" musical triangle that students clang anytime a peer is reading aloud with too little expression.

Morris, well known among county educators for the enthusiasm and creativity he brings to teaching, has long wanted to write a book about all the classroom management techniques he has cooked up for children over the years and presented at teacher training seminars.

"Why not have the students do it?" Morris asked. "After all, they can tell you what really works and what doesn't."

The book's selections include the simple, such as "Max," the name given to the class digital timer they use instead of the classroom clocks, which are broken most of the time.

Then there's Starburst Math, named after the popular candy. The teacher dons a white lab coat with a fistful of Starburst squares in the right pocket and a name tag on the lapel—except that in place of a name, there's a math problem drawn in bright colors.

The teacher, transformed into Dr. Starburst, solicits students to come up with an answer to gain a candy reward.

The book even promotes "Classroom Clean-Up." Student Richard Padilla explains: "There's a jar full of jobs written on paper that are handed out randomly and which we have three minutes to do...it's our way of helping out the custodian."

Morris is a legend among Sequoia students for his energy, excitement, and caring attitude—and fifth grade students routinely pray to be assigned to his classroom the following year, students Gabe Legaspi and

Sergio Enriquez said.

"He's firm, but he doesn't ever raise his voice," student Mario Vasquez said. Mike Fisher added, "We learn a lot of stuff without just using our books."

Morris used the book-writing project to push creative thinking, writing, cooperative learning, and art into one integrated learning project.

"Early on I picked 'Max' as an example for students to think about how to describe," Morris said. "We talked about it for a while, then I gave everyone twenty minutes to write down their thoughts."

Morris took home the papers, made notes for the students, and solicited a student editor who had turned in a colorful description for that article. That student was paired with a classmate to look over all the papers and come up with a final version.

"Overachiever, underachiever, it doesn't matter," Morris said. "The key is to get kids involved, to give them power in a positive way."

Morris had the final product copyrighted by the district and printed using his own desktop publishing system.

For Morris, the only real surprise came in looking over some of the students' selections, such as "Clay Sculpting." It's an idea that's new this year to mesh art, listening skills, and creativity. While students work with modeling clay in the afternoon, Morris reads aloud from a novel.

Morris wasn't sure how it would go over. The class, though, embraced it.

"The purpose is to see how creative you can be as you listen to a story," students wrote. "After we are finished, we walk around the room to see what other students have created."

Morris said, "That inclusion was great because it shows that students really can pick up on the fun of learning."