

# Redlands students on a mission to ‘escape’ their classroom

*By Kristina Hernandez, Redlands Daily Facts*

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(REDLANDS) Janelle Vecchio is a bit obsessed with escape game rooms.

So when she heard Redlands Educational Partnership Foundation was looking to award grants to educators with creative learning experiences, the Mission Elementary School third grade educator submitted her idea for a “Treasure Hunters Puzzle Room Adventure.”

For two days starting on Wednesday, clusters of Mission third- and fourth-graders were given 30 minutes to tackle a series of puzzles to uncover and unlock a chest of hidden treasure using teamwork, communication and a bit of problem-solving.

And by the end of the school day Thursday, about 200 students had participated in the activity.

“I wanted to try and get as many kids through as possible because I thought it would be really good test preparation for the SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium),” said Vecchio. “They’re going to have to do similar problems on the test, which is going to be a bit of a stressful situation. And while this was a stressful situation, I thought it would be a good real-life situation for them.”

Vecchio’s project is exactly what Redlands Educational Partnership — or REP — looks for when awarding grants to educators. According to the nonprofit’s website, REP’s mission is to make education a priority in the area, enhance student learning opportunities and help prepare students in the Redlands Unified School District to become contributing members of society.

Vecchio has been working on the escape room since November. With the \$1,875 REP grant, she was able to transform her classroom into a pirate ship with help from her husband, Phil, and brother-in-law Matt Vecchio of Mountain Room Escapes in Big Bear, who provided tech equipment for the project.

The trio used several props from her classroom, like student desks, to house activities. As students unlocked clues to lead to the grand prize, a soundtrack of adventure-themed songs from Disney’s “Pirates of the Caribbean” to Lucasfilm’s “Indiana Jones” franchise played in the background.

Students who entered the room shortly after 9 a.m. completed the puzzle with 15 seconds to spare.

“I thought it was really cool and funny,” said Ethan McCready, a 9-year-old fourth-grader from Redlands.

“We were a bit stressed out because we didn’t know how much time was going by,” added fellow fourth-grader Sarai Williams, 9 of Riverside. “But when we were doing the puzzle (at the end) it was really fun because we had to work together as a team to put it together.”

Vecchio hopes to continue the activity for years to come — if funding is available. She has the backing of school Principal Denise Fee, who called the activity a great learning experience that brings the Common Core curriculum standards to life.

“Redlands Educational Partnership does so much for our schools in Redlands,” Vecchio said, “so if I can get the funding every year to be a part of that, I would definitely be up for that challenge and that task ever year.”

To learn more about REP, go to [rep4schools.com](http://rep4schools.com).