

Henry County Local

EIS work to Unlock school's potential

By Christopher Brooke

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Students in the Eminence Independent Schools Unlock class going through their paces in design and presenting information about the class with the goal of providing international aid to the public.

Unlock students at Eminence High School see an old school bus as a vehicle to educate others about cultures around the world and as a way to drive their international aid efforts.

Not used to transport students any longer, a lot will ride on the bus as a mobile classroom. Students still have a lot of work to do before they know exactly how to get there.

The students sit in the proverbial driver's seat when determining how to reach their goals, according to facilitator/teacher Jennifer Montgomery.

The Unlock idea came about in spring 2014, when students asked educators for a significant shift in their class work.

"A small group of students went to the principal and said we want school to be different, and they wanted a class where they could actually do something hands-on, something real, not just take a test," Montgomery said. When the students said they wanted to make a change in the classroom and make a difference globally, Principal Shannon Treece listened. She talked to students, teachers and community leaders and together they came up with Unlock.

With the principal facilitating, the students met twice a week for nine weeks to develop a mission statement.

"Their mission statement is that they are a student organization that exists to education, empower and equip children and families in impoverished communities around the world in a self-sustaining duplicable way," Montgomery explained.

Because Montgomery already had gotten involved in project-based learning ideas, the principal asked her to facilitate when the Unlock class began with ninth through twelfth-graders this fall.

Students in the project-based classes use technology heavily, so they earn technology credits, she said. Because they are reading about Nicaraguan history, such as the Sandinista overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, Jaguar Smile, they get history credit. Because the students are making presentations to many groups from two to 500 interested in the project, many of whom are educators, they get public speaking credit. Because they read books like Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* — about missionaries going into the Congo without really finding out about the peoples' needs first, so about everything they do fails — and because they write about the Unlock efforts, students earn English credits.

"What's really different about this class, the students are really the drivers of all the work," Montgomery said. "I'm really more like a facilitator or a coach."

With the goal in place to help kids in all different places in all different cultures, Unlock students looked around for a partner to advise them on conditions in other countries, including potential projects.

The students developed a business plan, itemizing what they wanted to accomplish, Montgomery said. The aid group advisor recommended choosing a country relatively close by, so travel wouldn't cost as much and it wouldn't take a lot of time to get to.

The students chose Carlos Mayorga as their partner on the ground in Nicaragua to find out what communities there would need help.

"He discovered there is a lot of illness because of unclean water there," Montgomery said. "They do have a school but it only goes up to second grade. What they want first is to go up to grade five — they have the teachers but they don't have the space, so the first thing they want to do is add three more classrooms."

The students Skype with Mayorga and community leaders to come up with a shared vision.

The class will further build their relationship with community leaders when they travel to Nicaragua in March over spring break, Montgomery said.

At this point, it appears that Unlock can help fight disease in the community by providing filters to sanitize the water. They can get a start on that, with each water filter sourced in that country for \$26, but probably won't be able to provide one to all 400 families this spring.

The class also sought out many experts to help with the many different and necessary components to this project, Montgomery said. For example, a fundraiser spoke to the students for nearly three hours about ways to bring in the money they need to support the work.

A physician talked to the class about holistic approaches to solve problems, like not putting a latrine uphill from a water supply and using clean water to clean wounds.

A social studies instructor advised them how to get the word out about their project, which is how the students have been getting so many speaking engagements.

"One of their main messages as far as speaking to these groups is school can be different, school can be meaningful," Montgomery said.

One student's testimony relates to always getting in trouble before Unlock started because school was boring, she recalled. Now, he wants to come to school because of Unlock.

A blog entry tells of student Feven Kruer's experience in the class. She finds the workload heavy and the presentations uncomfortable, and then she remembers the good the class strives to do.

"Then I think about the kids," she posted at <http://www.eisunlock.org/blog>. "I think about the kids that are going to bed with their bellies growling because they didn't get enough food to eat. I think about the kids that have holes in their jeans, not because it looks cool, but because it is the same pair of jeans they have worn every day for the last year. The only pair of jeans they own.

"I remember why I signed up for this class. I want to help these kids. I want to make a difference. I begin to think that talking to some old people that I will probably never see again isn't so bad. Especially when I am wearing brand new clothes and have a belly full of food. I begin to think that I am going to make a difference. I begin to think that it is hard work but it is worth it!"

And all that work came before students could proceed with renovating the bus into Unlock's Interactive Cultural Experiences, or ICE — a roving classroom of fun, interactive displays, intended to give elementary students around this country a perspective on different peoples around the world.

Unlock participants developed their ideas by first interviewing 150 elementary students about what they like about school and what makes learning fun.

As a result, the interactive stations on the bus will involve students building their concept of a home out of Legos, which will lead to a discussion about different kinds of housing found around the world; 25 different versions of the smash hit "Let It Go" will give children an idea about different languages; a station about sports from other countries; how people shop in markets and eat in different countries and more.

Unlock tested their stations with other elementary students, and the children responded to the displays very well, Montgomery said.

Right now, the bus awaits a new floor and the installation of the learning stations. The class hopes to have the work completed by March.

All this takes funds. Montgomery said the hope is fees for ICE visiting elementary schools could provide a sustainable source for the international aid efforts the students want to carry out.

Students have posted a fundraising website at bitly/UNLOCKgofundme. Montgomery said this round monies raised will go toward paying for plane tickets to Nicaragua in the spring.

Just the trip is estimated at about \$25,000.

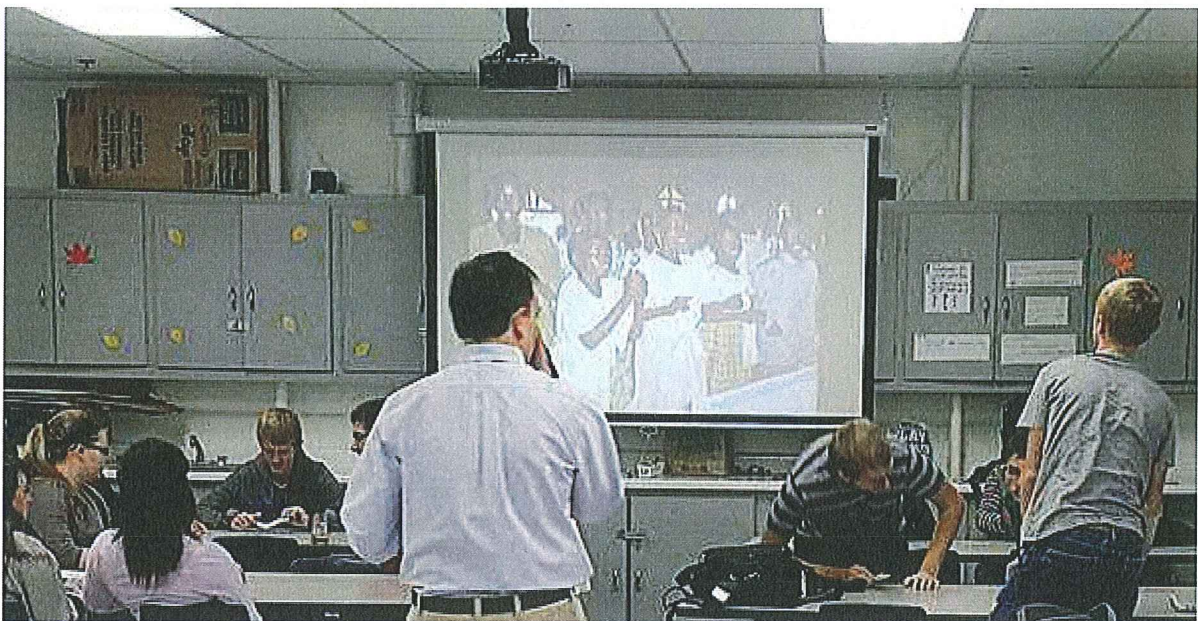
The students created a huge job for themselves in order to achieve their vision.

"I think the reason they're willing to do the work is they're invested in it," Montgomery said. "They designed the class, so they're very passionate about the work."

Additional Photos are on the following pages.



Students in the Eminence Independent Schools Unlock class going through their paces in design and presenting information about the class with the goal of providing international aid to the public.



Dr. Frink gives a talk to the Unlock class about simple health care ideas that can make a difference in protecting the well-being of the communities the students want to serve, such as not building a latrine uphill from the water supply.



The Unlock students have received help on the ground in Nicaragua by partnering with Carlos Mayorga, who has gathered information about what the class can do to help there.



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Class Photo