



Four teams from Vista Magnet Middle School will participate in the Sally Ride TOYchallenge. Taking a silent vote with their eyes closed to determine how to proceed on their project are team members (from left) Luisa Petaia, Christopher Rhynes, Dominik Pulido, Emily Garcia and Lauren Mortimer. John Gastaldo | Union-Tribune

## Creative challenge

### Vista sixth-graders compete in toy design contest

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A book of board games that takes you around the world.

A new twist on the teeter-totter.

A ball that can teach the alphabet, and a gum ball machine that asks trivia questions.

These ideas have propelled four teams of sixth-graders from Vista Magnet Middle School to the final round of a national toy design contest.

The West Coast competition of the Sally Ride TOYchallenge, set for May 31 at Qualcomm Stadium, is a test of teamwork, creativity and design skills. Sixty teams will compete for the grand prize and awards in three categories.

Vista Magnet Middle School is the sole North County representative in TOYchallenge.

To qualify, the teams sent in drawings and explanations of how their toys would work. Since they were notified of their selection last month, the four Vista groups have been meeting at school, in homes and at the library to fine-tune their designs. They are scouring garages and hobby stores for parts to build prototypes. Each team is limited to a \$150 budget.

Science teachers Jessie Estrada and Michelle Anderson are coaching the teams. The students also have had help from local high school students and mentors from Northrop Grumman.

“It’s a open-ended, team-oriented project,” Estrada said. “They have been brainstorming and flying with ideas. There’s a lot of enthusiasm.”

On a recent afternoon, the students gathered in Estrada’s classroom to work on their projects as they ate lunch.

“The Adventures of the Amazing Penguin Pirates” is the name of the board game designed by the group with the same name. They said working on the project was a lesson in teamwork.

“We all had different ideas,” said team member Lauren Mortimer. “We talked it out and narrowed it down to one.”

Members of the Sparks team polled their siblings to see if the idea for a new kind of teeter-totter would fly. The teeter-totter would have the capability to spin around as well as go up and down. It would have seat belts for the safety of young children.

“Everyone we talked to thought it was a great idea,” said team member Matt Green.

Aiji Treadwell is part of Smart Alix, the team that has come up with the gum ball machine idea.

“It has a video screen,” Aiji said. “It asks you educational questions. When you get the right answer, it spits out a gum ball.”

J.T. Pimonian and his three teammates on the Lightning Wires went online to research what was available in the market before zeroing in on the idea for an educational toy to teach the letters of the alphabet.

“It’s a ball with speakers for its ears,” J.T. said.

TOYchallenge, which began in 2003, is a program of Sally Ride Science founded by astronaut Ride. Its goal is to support young women and girls interested in careers in math,

science, engineering and technology. The contest requires that at least half the team be made up of girls.

Jose Villareal, principal of Vista Magnet Middle School, said the competition gave students a chance to express their creativity.

“It’s wonderful to see the students extend themselves, push themselves,” Villareal said. “It’s refreshing to see that unfettered creativity.

“It’s a validation that students of that age have something important to contribute to society. It reinforces our mission to teach them to work as a team, to cooperate.”

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