

Nonprofit Little Kids Rock brings music training to dozens of Bay Area schools

By: Amy Crawford | 11/25/11 2:54 PM
Examiner Staff Writer

“Do you remember A? Which fingers do we use?” third-grade teacher Judy Toupin asked her class. “One, two and three!” the children recited.

Their small hands wrapped around the necks of three-quarter-size acoustic guitars, the children picked out the chords for Chuck Berry’s 1958 hit “Johnny B. Goode.”

It’s not a traditional music class, but the 10 boys and girls at the Rooftop K-8 School in Twin Peaks seemed to be having more fun with rock ’n’ roll than they might be playing “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on a recorder.

“You’ll hear them playing Chuck Berry, Lady Gaga, Madonna,” said Mike Fernandez, who sits on the board of Little Kids Rock, the nonprofit that donated the guitars and lesson plans to Rooftop.

Although the lessons are unorthodox, Principal Diana Marshall said the students were learning more than how to play a guitar just like ringing a bell.

“I think they learn confidence, collaboration,” Marshall said. “They learn about creativity, especially when they start writing, and with that they learn problem-solving, putting words to music.”

Little Kids Rock was founded in 2002 by David Wish, a former Redwood City elementary school



Mike Koozmin/The Examiner

Tuned up: Judy Toupin conducts a Rooftop K-8 School guitar class with third-graders.

teacher. Since then, with the support of rock stars such as Paul Simon and Slash, it has donated guitars, drums and keyboards to students in two dozen cities across the country and more than 60 schools in the Bay Area, including 25 in San Francisco and nine on the Peninsula. The nonprofit also provides teachers with lesson plans such as how to write a rock song.

“They give you the tools, they give you the lessons,” said Toupin, who, like most Little Kids Rock instructors, is a classroom teacher who knows how to play guitar, rather than a music instructor.

“You’d be surprised how many teachers are quiet rock stars,” Fernandez said.

Toupin, who has taught guitar for four years, said the 8- and 9-year-olds in her class will be playing full songs and writing their own by the end of the school year.

“It’s intended to inspire kids to play and write their own music, which is very different from how most music programs are taught,” Fernandez said. “They’re learning a new mode of expression.”

Schoolhouse rock

Little Kids Rock’s impact in the Bay Area

65 Schools with program

3,208 Students participating

74 Teachers involved