Teacher profile: Susan Rickey, Scott Valley Junior High School

In a five day period, Mrs. Rickey’s students threw away 178 ziploc bags, 158 paper towels, 145 batteries, 53 paper plates and cups, 147 chipped cans, and many other items.

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Scott Valley Junior High teacher Susan Rickey has already transformed the way students learn math in her class, and now, her efforts have helped make SVJH one of 12 middle schools in the nation that will take part in an educational writing project.

Rickey has been teaching in Scott Valley for approximately 15 years, starting out at Etna Elementary School before heading to SVJH five years ago, where she currently teaches sixth grade math and science.

It was in math education where she first made some major changes – turning her room into a “360 degree math room” in the 2016–17 school year with the help of a grant that she wrote and received.

The concept started with the addition of different levels of seating that allow students to change their perspective and collaborate with others. The next step involved the installation of white boards all around the room, and the addition of a SmartBoard TV, which allows the user to utilize a number of different teaching tools electronically on a large screen.

One of the advantages of the white boards, Rickey said, is that she can stand in a central location and see all of the students as they work through problems, giving her an opportunity to see the work unfold and step in to assist where needed.

“The kids really love it,” she said of the changes, and it has helped her work toward the goal of the grant she received: Helping students of all backgrounds have the same chance of success.

In addition to the physical changes to the room, Rickey has also shown students how they can integrate writing into math, and that in turn has helped to land her a role as a facilitator for the Northern California Writing Project.
The NCWP is one part of the National Writing Project, which historically has been limited to junior high and above. The organization is going to be adding an upper elementary division next year, and will include grades four, five and six. Last fall, Rickey attended a conference in Chico, California, and was asked afterward to head to Atlanta, Georgia, to represent the NCWP.

When she becomes a facilitator for the program next school year, she will be able to train other teachers who are new to the program.

The goal of the writing project will be teaching younger students how to make an argument and then support it with evidence. She explained that the students come up with a claim based on a subject, and then they are tasked with writing in support of that claim utilizing facts and trustworthy evidence.

She noted that so far, her students have really enjoyed the process.

Teaching students new ways to think critically fits into Rickey’s classroom well; she noted that her favorite aspect of teaching is showing students something new, walking them through the steps to build upon it, and seeing the light come on as they progress – and next school year, she’ll get that opportunity with other teachers, too.