Tech News

Greetings!

Kevin Karplus

The Spring Hill Tech Club is a new after school activity for 4th, 5th, and 6th graders at Spring Hill School, Tuesdays 3:10–4:30. It is a free drop-in activity I'm running with my son, Abe.

Our main activity for the first couple of months will be learning to use Scratch to do computer animation and simple 2D video games. Scratch is new kid-friendly computer programming language from the MIT Media Lab. Currently, it is in beta release, which means there are still a few bugs they are working on, but it is quite usable as is.

You can run scratch at home! The scratch language runs on both Windows machines and Mac OS X computers and is available for free download from MIT. Because they do not have an official release yet (scheduled for later this month), I have put pointers on my web site for where to get the version we are using (as well as some example programs) at

http://www.soe.ucsc.edu/~karplus/scratch_programs

We have not yet worked out a good way for students to transfer programs between home and school computers. It will be important for them to play with scratch at home, as the Tech Club time will not be long enough for them to get really comfortable with the language and do big projects.

Future Activities

We plan to have Tech Club be a center for fun activities based on science and engineering. What we do will depend on what kids express an interest in, and what ideas parents can bring. I have some ideas for activities other than computer animation, but I'll undoubtedly need more. Send me ideas at
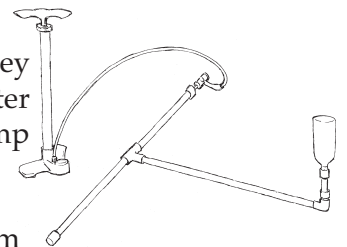
karplus@soe.ucsc.edu

Here are a few of the ideas:

Sound Crew

The Parent Club recently purchased a new amplifier for the sound system that is lighter and easier to use than the old sound board, but it still has a lot of features. The staff plan to learn one way to set it up, but the students in Tech Club can learn what all the different knobs and sliders do, and serve as sound crew for assemblies and other events.

Soda-bottle rocket launchers

The 5th grade class loved the science lab in which they launched soda-bottle water rockets, using a bicycle pump and a simple PVC pipe launching system. When the weather turns warm again, each Tech Club member can make his or her own launcher to take home. This will involve a small material fee for the parts (probably around $5, not including the bicycle pump).

Family Science Night

On the Tuesday night of testing week (April 24), there will be a Family Science Night, with fun activities for kids and their parents. The Tech Club can help plan some of the activities, help set up the stations, and make the Family Science Night their event.