

# Positive peer pressure



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Watsonville High mentors Joey Barrera (from left) and Dominic Rodriguez help Melissa Gallegos, an eighth-grader at Solano Summit Academy, Wednesday with her trebuchet for Saturday's MESA competition at UC Santa Cruz.

## Students help students in new mentoring program

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In the aging gymnasium of a small Watsonville church, a group of students was busy Wednesday morning building trebuchets — small wooden catapults. They were using the contraptions to hurl beanbags at a target 50 feet away, and loving every minute of it.

The students were busy preparing

their projects for the Math, Engineering and Science Achievement contest this weekend at UC Santa Cruz.

The students are from Solano Summit Academy, a non-traditional day school for sixth- through eighth-graders. The school is nestled in the First Christian Church on Madison Street, sharing a handful of small classrooms and a gymnasium.

One of the things that make the

school notable is its focus on small class sizes, and their use of peer mentors — seniors from Watsonville High School who spend part of their day working with the Solano students.

Solano Summit Academy Principal Jack Sherman contacted WHS principal Murry Schekman last year to discuss a peer mentor program. After

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# MENTORS

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developing a course description, the program was launched at the beginning of this school year.

"We realized that high school kids would be great peer models to help the younger kids make better decisions," said Schekman. "The peer dynamic in junior high is extremely powerful."

The WHS seniors get elective credit for participating, but

most of the 15 mentors say they do it for the sheer enjoyment of working with young people.

"I know where they're coming from," said mentor Joey Berrera, of his choice to join the peer mentorship program. "I grew up without a mother or father, and I understand their hardships. I can give them guidance, and tell them what I wish I had learned when I was their age."

Every day, the peer mentors spend a school period at the school, helping wherever they're needed, which can in-

clude in English language arts, math and science.

They also spend time between classes, socializing, eating lunch and sometimes indulging in a game of ping-pong.

Additionally, eighth-graders spend time "shadowing" one of the mentors as they go through a typical day at WHS. The idea, said Sherman, is to help Solano students make the transition from the intimate academic setting with 33 students to WHS, which boasts more than 2,000.

"Heck yeah, I like it," said 14-

year-old Jacob Hernandez. "The teachers actually have time to help. In other schools the classes are too big and the teachers don't have time. I have something to look forward to when I come to school now."

Melissa Gallegos, 14, spent Wednesday morning working on her trebuchet, but has also built a small car powered by a mousetrap, designed her own Web site and a model of a human gastrointestinal tract, all with the help of a peer mentor.

"It's fun, because you get to do all kinds of projects," she said.

To supplement his plans to work with young people when he graduates from college, mentor Dominic Rodriguez also took the elective course.

"I want to give them the right start in life, and to help with academic and life knowledge," he said.

Solano Summit Academy provides small classroom settings for 33 students referred by teachers and principals from other PVUSD middle schools for attendance, academic or behavioral problems. The school also



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**Watsonville High senior Richi Landa (left) serves as a mentor as he works with a Solano Summit Academy student Wednesday on a trebuchet.**

provides academic services for students who have been expelled. Designed to provide small class sizes, the school is near capacity at 33 students.

"The peer mentors are all devoted to working with the kids here, and they deeply care about them," said Sherman. "They're putting back into the community by taking the time to provide

these young people, and providing leadership models."

"We want to help these kids return to the traditional school setting and be successful," he said. "These relationships with the peers are invaluable."