

South Bronx students become filmmakers for a week

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This year, students had 72 hours to create a short film about their lives. (Spectrum News NY1)

'Design Competition' lets Bronx students become filmmakers for a week

BY Emma Barnett The Bronx

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Ricardo Salmon is a 10th grader at Comp Sci High, a charter school in the South Bronx. But this week, he is a filmmaker.

"My documentary is about the dangers of commuting to school, which could be either walking, taking the train, or by bus," Salmon said. "How can we change it for it to be more safe."

What You Need To Know

- Comp Sci High, a charter school in the South Bronx, ditched the typical high school curriculum for a week and instead, taught students about filmmaking
- It's part of their biannual initiative called "Design Competition"
- Students are split into teams and have 72 hours to make a documentary about their lives in the Bronx

- This year's winning films will be screened at the New York African Film Festival in May

It's part of an initiative that his entire school takes part in called "Design Competition."

David Noah, the executive director and founder of Comp Sci High, says each "Design Competition" is different. Some of the past competitions include building a video game to teach financial literacy and coming up with a TED Talk.

"Every year, we cancel classes for a week twice a year, so two weeks a year, once in the fall, once kind of winter, spring, and we split up the whole school into teams," Noah told NY1. "We call it 'Design Competition,' but really, it's kind of 'Shark Tank' meets project-based learning."

This year, students had 72 hours to create a short film about their lives.

"We really want to empower our kids to feel like their stories matter. They matter, that they have something interesting and useful to share with the world," Noah said. "And we also want to give them an experience that shows them what real work is like, which is, it's team-based. It's open-ended. It's complex. It's not just fill out a worksheet in class and you're done in 50 minutes."

This kind of competition aligns with the mission of the school, which is career focused and aiming to get every student to economic freedom by the age of 25.

"We're building those soft skills so that when they graduate, they are ready for the world," principal Iris Alder told NY1. "A lot of schools say that, and it's like, but you focus on history, math, English, and science only. And while that is important to build a collegiate student, a holistic human, so that you're cultured and you can engage in certain ways, how do we make them human beings of society? How do we make sure they're able to navigate different environments and explore different things? And weeks like 'Design Competition' do that."

Alder says offering an incentive is a key part of "Design Competition." In addition to a monetary prize, this year's winning films will be screened at the New York African Film Festival in May.

"We want to show them that. Like, you did so good. You deserve to be in a film festival. You can do bigger things. Your work does deserve to be compensated, and showing them their worth. So it's about that worth as well," she said.

Another highlight of the week is meeting with media and entertainment executives to brainstorm ideas.

Cassidy Layton, an actress in "Severance," was one of the many people students got to chat with.

“It feels so foundational that we support young artists,” Layton said. “Giving them the chance to focus on just that for a week and focus on expressing themselves, I think it's so important culturally and socially.”

From the script to the screen, Salmon says he gained a new perspective being a filmmaker.

“Definitely teamwork and collaboration, because with my group, we've never really done something like this before,” he said.