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Rep. Jimmy Panetta visits Gonzales High to look at student project

The representative spoke with students about project

By Juan Reyes, Monterey County Herald

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Gonzales >> The Gonzales High School campus was empty on Monday afternoon as students were on a much needed spring break just before the end of the school year.

But that didn't stop a group of students in the Wings of Knowledge program from hosting Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, to discuss an idea that could benefit farmers and forecasters in the near future.

The students showed off a new weather station project they've been working on in collaboration with the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration.

"What we're seeing today, what I just heard about throughout this presentation, that's our future when it comes to our agriculture. When it comes to technology and combination of ag/tech, they get it," Panetta said.

The students also talked about other initiatives they're involved with and some upcoming projects, while Panetta talked about the upcoming California farm bill.

Gonzales High School freshman Lola Mendoza was one of the nine Wings of Knowledge students at Monday afternoon's meeting with Panetta.

"I thought that it was really cool because (Panetta is) actually taking his time to come and see what we're doing. I think that's really important and special," Mendoza said.

Mendoza, who's on the Earth Sciences Research Group, was in charge of putting together a plan on how the weather stations will be built and used to collect forecast data to send to NOAA's server via the internet.

Mendoza said today's message to Panetta was to let him know that the students put in a lot of thought and consideration about all the projects they've been working on.

"I think that our main point would be to get him to know that we're actually caring for what's happening around us and that we also want to serve the communities," Mendoza said. "We're not doing to this just because it looks good on our résumé but because we feel good when we're doing it."

The students of Wings of Knowledge showed off the weather station's new sensors and software capabilities at last month's Science Maker Faire at Soledad High School. The weather station was built to collect

weather-related data that could help NOAA enhance the accuracy of its weather forecasts in the Salinas Valley.

“So this type of precision farming, it’s the future and what you’re seeing in this room with these young men and women, they’re going to lead that effort,” Panetta said.

Panetta said the fact the students have the exposure to work with an organization like NOAA is important and stressed to them to continue to reach out to provide knowledge and guidance.

As for funding, most of the costs for equipment and trips are out-of-pocket expenses for Vahid Motazedian, the Wings of Knowledge co-founder and program coordinator along with financial support from the city of Gonzales, the Gonzales Unified School District and local Monterey County foundations.

Panetta said he hopes the students can benefit somehow from the California farm bill but told them to continue to speak up. He mentioned he’ll do what he can to get the group help with funding and there are a number of other members of congress who agree with the same efforts.

“If you look at the budget that came out of the administration, all of us were very concerned with the lack of funding or the cuts to funding for important agencies like NOAA,” Panetta said. “But we’ve made sure and we continue to fight for and be adamant and have a full-throated voice to ensure that type of funding continues for NOAA and especially projects like this.”

Motazedian said he was really impressed that Panetta kept up with the news about the Wings of Knowledge program and that he called the high school to see what the students were working on.

Motazedian said he was happy to see Panetta was encouraging and that he praised the students for working from the bottom and fighting to get to the top.

“He really did connect with this group of students,” Motazedian said. “The impact on the students was really positive.”

Panetta said he never thought of building a weather station or anything of that nature when he was around the same age as the Wings of Knowledge students. He was committed to other things like football and wrestling.

“They’re committed to the future and the environment and dealing with the big issue that’s always going to affect all of us and that’s climate change,” Panetta said. “So what you’re seeing is not a selfishness. You’re seeing of sense of community and a sense of what it takes to ensure that we continue to flourish and prosper in this community.”

Panetta was also at Gonzales High to award sophomore Andrew Funk with a Congressional Award, which Panetta said is a public-private partnership created by the United States Congress to promote and recognize achievement initiative service in America’s youth ages 14-23.

Panetta said during the presentation that “the Congressional Award provides a unique opportunity for people like Andrew (Funk) to set and achieve personally challenging goals that build character and foster community service, personal development and citizenship.”

Funk said he did all the hard work for people in the community because he just wants to see it grow. He takes part in various sports and is part of the Boy Scouts where is also a Life Scout, where he proposed a project to go to one of the labor camps in Gonzales to add wooden benches for families. Funk said he was going to

attend a Gonzales City Council meeting to propose the project to the mayor Maria Orozco.

Funk said receiving the Congressional Awards means a lot to him because it's for all the recognition and hard work he's done. He also said it's extra special because it was given by Panetta himself.

"It's like saying I have done it," Funk said. "I have finally done this after all the hard work that I've done, I finally get acknowledged for it. So, I really think it's this great opportunity."

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