

Published: April 28, 2011

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Leadership development group partners with Henrico school to impart lessons



Credit: LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Marivic Mitchell, science head at Moody Middle School, rigs the "grand finale" rocket, which was fired at the culmination of the service activity classes. Bounce, a leadership development organization, has partnered with the Henrico County school.

By Luz Lazo

The seventh-graders loudly counted down from five and then waited for the rocket to launch.

A failed first attempt prompted laughter among the approximately 300 Moody Middle School students gathered at the school's soccer field Wednesday. A second failure wasn't as funny and led to some disappointed faces.

But on the third try, and yet another countdown, the rocket ignited and the boys and girls screamed excitedly as they looked skyward.

The rockets — 10, one for each class — symbolized how each student found their spark, or passion, and how the sky is the limit for making the world a better place when they put their passion to work.

The rockets were the ritual to end the students' service activity classes as part of a curriculum offered by Bounce, a leadership development organization that coaches professionals and three years ago partnered with the Henrico County school.

At Moody, Bounce has been studying how to implement effective leadership development in a school setting. The classrooms have served as the setting for Bounce's clients — from private, public and nonprofit organizations — to practice leadership skills, get feedback from the students and teach students about leadership.

Evan Leibowitz, 13, said he has learned about how to be a leader and more about caring for others.

"A lot of kids in the school, we have a lot and it is important to take time to give to kids who don't have a lot," said Evan, who with his classmates organized a pin dodge tournament and raised \$200 for the Fulton Hill community center. The same class sold about 900 lollipops in six days to raise \$550 for the Autism Society of Richmond.

As part of the program, the seventh-graders have engaged in community-service projects. They have collected essential items such as toothpaste and soap for poor families, raised money for service members, collected dog toys and other animal-care supplies for the New Kent County Animal Shelter and collected school supplies and clothing for an orphanage in Haiti.

"The little things we do to help people can make a difference," said Livi Justis, 13, who volunteers at the Fulton Hill community center and got her classmates to work toward supporting the organization.

The teachers are also engaged in leadership development and coaching sessions, said Kelly Lewis, who founded Bounce three years ago. Moody is the only local public school currently in partnership with Bounce, which is run by professional leadership coaches. The program is funded through donations and next year is expected to cost about \$60,000.

She said the culture in the school has changed, with students becoming a lot more active in community service.

"They start to discover themselves, who they are, what their strengths are and what they are great at, and then what they do is they get to apply that to making a difference in the community," Lewis said.

Principal Art Raymond said the investment in the program is worth it.

"I feel like we talk a lot about preparing kids for tomorrow all the time, preparing them for the world of work and when they become adults and when they get out of school," he said. "But what this does is prepare them for working in the world today in terms of their service, and it shows the kids that even though they are young they can contribute."