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Whodunits spice up science

To steer kids toward tech careers, schools get creative

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By MICHELE BESSO
The News Journal
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NEWARK -- Straight out of a scene from "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," 80 middle-school students became minicriminologists Tuesday as they learned to take blood samples, collect evidence from a crime scene, lift fingerprints and use technology to solve crimes.

Their teacher wasn't some actor from a top-rated television show about a team of crime scene investigators.

He was Newark police Cpl. Tom Maiura, who specializes in criminology. He and other law enforcement officials are working with the students in a special biotechnology camp -- "Solving Crimes, Curing Disease, Feeding the World and Developing Careers in the New Millennium" - this week at the University of Delaware.

With math and science scores lagging nationwide, specialized camps such as this are attracting more attention from parents and teachers hoping to inspire kids to pursue a tech-based educational and career path.

"It appears that American students are not choosing to study science in the numbers we need," said Jeanette L. Miller, research administrator at the Delaware Biotechnology Institute in Newark. "We know that it's critical to get students excited about science early on, before high school. It's also important because they and their parents have decisions to make about what course work to take."

Below state standards

Only 52 percent of 10th-graders in Delaware passed the math portion of this year's statewide standardized test - down a percentage point from last year. Nearly half of Delaware's middle- and high-schoolers don't meet the math standard.

To make math and science more appealing to students, organizers of the 4-H's biotechnology camp incorporate a murder mystery.

The 4-H program of the Delaware Cooperative Extension, for kids ages 8-14, has sponsored educational camps for years, but this is the first time 4-H has run a biotechnology camp, said Mark J. Manno, state 4-H extension educator.

"Biotechnology is an emerging issue in this country," Manno said. "Kids need to learn about it at an early age to make a career choice. It's a huge concern at the government level that we're not producing enough



THE NEWS JOURNAL/FRED COMEGYS
Josh Derrickson, 9, and Pamela Zhang, 13, examine fingerprints at a camp to make math and science more appealing to young students. "It's cool and exciting," one camper said.



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Pearce Quesenberry, 8, snaps a photo of her fellow campers as they try solve a fictional murder.



Steven delCampo

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people to fill the jobs in the emerging biotech industry."

Steven delCampo, 10, of Christiana, who will attend Newark Charter School this fall, decided to go to camp because he thought it would be "cool to solve a murder mystery."

"It's cool and exciting at the same time, finding clues and using the GPS system," he said. "I learned how to see my own DNA, and that was really neat."

Steven's father, Dennis delCampo, said his wife thought it would be good for Steven "because he really likes science and math and does well at school."

"We want to encourage it and thought this would spur his interest," he said. "Hopefully he'll get more of that at school this fall, because he really likes the camp."

Through the camps, students learn more about what careers are available and the education that is required, Manno said.

Tough is good

If exercises such as learning how to take your own DNA sample or "building a baby with both dominant and recessive genes" seems like difficult material for an 8- or 10-year-old to grasp, that's the point, Manno said.

"There's a movement in the high schools to make all the curriculum college prep, not just dumb down stuff for kids," he said. "All these kids have seen 'CSI.' You want to knock TV, but at least it has gotten kids interested in these things."

When given options for improving high schools, 95 percent of students agreed that more real-world opportunities, such as internships, would help, according to an annual report on youth attitudes released Tuesday.

The nonprofit Horatio Alger Association, which provides college scholarships and mentoring to needy students, issued the annual report based on a phone survey of 1,005 students in high school last May.

More than 90 percent also favored earlier counseling in high school about how to prepare for college, and more opportunities to take college-level courses for free.

University of Delaware admissions workers plan to talk to students about careers in math and science at the end of the camp week and will track the students through high school, Manno said.

More camps

Delaware Technical & Community College also offered a camp this week. DelTech's biotechnology camp has more of an environmental bent.

"The purpose of the camp is to expose middle-school students to math and science, and it's also used as a recruiting tool," said Sue Zawislak, director of corporate and community programs at the Stanton/Wilmington campus. "It educates youngsters so they are aware of the opportunities out there and at the school."

Delaware State University in Dover also has offered several science and engineering camps over the summer.

Sara Peralta, 13, who attends Red Lion Christian Academy, heard about the UD camp from her mother, who works at the university.

"My favorite thing so far is making our own DNA," Sara said, describing the process of swishing saltwater in her mouth, spitting it into a jar and mixing it with salt and alcohol. "We took a sample and will analyze it in a lab. It's exciting."

Campers working in teams gathered evidence, questioned suspects and tried to figure out who killed a fictional professor named Halfrack, and who stole the professor's secret cloning formula.

They conducted experiments -- including visiting a "body farm" to determine how long chickens had been dead based on insect samples collected from the scene.

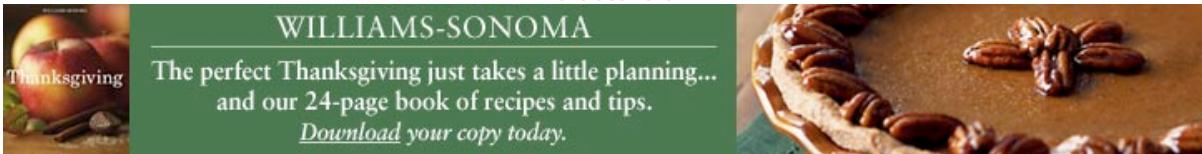
Barbara Grogg, president of the Delaware State Education Association, said she supports any effort to help students view math and science in an "exciting way."

"I think these camps are really a tremendous effort to encourage kids to explore different alternatives," Grogg said. "Hopefully, that interest and enthusiasm will carry over to college."

Information from the Associated Press was used in this article. Contact Michele Besso at 324-2386 or mbesso@delawareonline.com.

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